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# Knock on the door: A feminist standpoint theory case study of internationally educated Chinese females finding academic positions in China

Chenzi Feng Zhao  
*The University of Western Ontario*

Supervisor  
Marianne Larsen  
*The University of Western Ontario*

Graduate Program in Education  
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## **Abstract**

This study examines how gender shapes the experiences of internationally educated Chinese females in trying to obtain academic positions in Chinese higher education institutions from a feminist standpoint theory perspective. The interactions between education and gender in the contemporary globalized world have been an important theme in studies about education, gender, and social equity. Identifying the gaps in the statistic-based understandings of gender parity, this study adopts a qualitative narrative method and interviewed four female scholars who have applied and interviewed for academic jobs in China in the past four years. The findings are presented as four elaborate narratives. The life stories demonstrate various challenges, particularly gender-specific challenges, confronting women in starting and developing academic careers and women's intentionality and subjectivity in pursuing their careers. This study reveals the limitations and negative effects of neoliberal measurability and objectivity, and suggests concrete measures for institutions to promote gender equity.

## **Keywords**

Gender equity, gender and higher education, women in academia, China, feminist standpoint theory, narrative inquiry

## **Summary for Lay Audience**

Education is widely considered as an effective way to empower women and close gender gaps. In many contexts, the increase in females' access to education has been seen as a signifier of improvement in gender parity. This is particularly obvious in China, where the dominant discourse constantly uses the fact that women outnumbered men in universities to prove women and men are already equal. This study tries to counter the notion of measuring social equity only by numbers, explore the interactions between education and gender equity, examine women's agency in advancing educational attainments, and add nuanced understandings of women's experiences in higher education today.

Focusing on the lived experiences of internationally educated Chinese females who seek academic careers in China, this study asks: What happen when women look for academic jobs? What challenges do they face and how do they overcome the barriers? What is it like to be a woman in academia? This study positioned women's narratives told in their own voices as the source of knowledge. It interviewed four female scholars who have looked for academic positions in China in the past four years and asked them to recount their experiences with job application and life in academia as stories.

Through critical analysis of these stories, the study reveals the persistent discrimination against women in the academe and lack of support for female scholars. Further, the marketization of higher education emphasizes measurable research productivity and hinders females' development in academia. Universities' hiring practices are filled with unfairness and implicit obstructions. However, in the face of challenges and gender biases, all participants exhibited a sense of resilience and autonomy in seeking academic careers. This study presents female scholars' realities and struggles and corrects the misunderstandings of women's lives in academia. In doing so, it validates women's agency and sense of self. It unravels the myth of "objectivity" by revealing the injustice it caused and provide insights into the interrelation between knowledge and power. It also provides suggestions of concrete measures for institutions to advocate gender equity and improve fairness for all candidates.

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# Chapter 1

## 1 Introduction

Education is generally recognized as fundamental to human rights and an essential path to narrowing gender disparity (for example, Holmarsdottir, 2010; Sinha Mukherjee, 2015; Zeng, Pang, Zhang, Medina, & Rozelle, 2014). But the correlations between education and empowerment of women have long been contested. Researchers have noticed in recent decades a global trend of smaller gender differences concerning access to education at all levels. The trend is particularly conspicuous in some Asian countries, such as China, Japan, and India, where gender differences in access to education used to be dramatic (Liu, 2017; Nozaki, Aranha, Fix Dominguez, & Nakajima, 2009; Sinha Mukherjee, 2015). However, in further research on gender gaps in education, employment and participation in academia in these countries, Sinha Mukherjee (2015) and Nozaki et al. (2009) found that education was not necessarily associated with improvements in other aspects of women's socio-economic status.

Chinese higher education institutions and scholars constantly use numbers of female students in all levels of education as a measurement of gender parity (for example, Lee, 2014; Zhang & Chen, 2014; McGarry & Sun, 2018). Yet, beyond these statistics, little attention is paid to females' actual experiences in higher education, including their actual day to day life in higher education and encounters with institutions when they apply for academic jobs. The latter is the focus of this study. In conducting this qualitative case study, I attempt to unveil various challenges women confront and overcome in their transition from the campus as graduate students to the workplace as professors. I am interested in the ways in which education can (or fails to) assist female scholars to find an

academic position in the neoliberal academic job market, and how they negotiate their agency and subjectivity within a male-dominated world. Building on women's own accounts of their job-hunting experiences, this study interrogates the hiring practices of institutions as well. Specifically, the focus of this study is on internationally trained Chinese female scholars and their experiences trying to secure an academic position in a Chinese higher education institution. Next, I outline the broad contexts of my study, beginning with the topic of gender in Chinese society.

## **1.1 Context**

Partially due to the national indoctrination of Marxist egalitarianism, it is widely accepted that men and women are already equal in China. With the rise of neoliberalism in China in recent decades, this gender equality narrative is frequently supported by statistics of women's enrollment in tertiary education as noted above. For instance, in September 2015, the Information Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China issued a white paper on gender equality and women's development in China (State Council Information Office of the PRC, 2015). The white paper stated that the gap between men and women regarding the opportunity to education was closing based on the increased percentages of female students in schools and higher education institutions. It highlighted the percentage of women enrolled in postsecondary institutions (52.1%) and masters programs (51.6%) compared with men. According to this document, the fact that females outnumbered males in higher education was viewed as solid evidence of the high social status and equal rights Chinese women enjoyed.

However, in the recent annual "Global Gender Gap Reports" released by World Economic Forum, China ranked 106 among 153 countries evaluated in 2020 and 103/149

in 2018 in the ranking based on the smallest gender discrepancy, experiencing a continuous decline in the evaluation over ten years since 2008, which signifies a severe failure to close gender gaps (World Economic Forum, 2018, 2020). According to these reports, China was the champion in equal enrolment in tertiary education, but was below average with regard to other indexes such as economic participation. Chinese women's participation in the economy as professional and technical workers was the highest among all countries while the gender wage gap persisted and female legislators, senior officials, and managers only account for 20 percent of their male counterparts. Worse still, the health and survival of Chinese women remained at the very bottom among all countries listed, some of which are the most economically underdeveloped in the world (World Economic Forum, 2018, 2020).

Another emerging phenomenon related to gender in China that merits attention is Chinese females' rising awareness about and actions against the patriarchal nature of higher education. In January 2018, #MeToo movement kicked off in China with a former graduate student in one of China's most prestigious universities accusing her former professor of sexual harassment (Ho & Tsoi, 2018). The incident ignited much public discussion and led to the suspension of the professor (Ho & Tsoi, 2018; Hernández & Mou, 2018). Since then, numerous women have spoken out online against sexual violence on campus; the majority of the allegations being against male professors (Ho & Tsoi, 2018; Yang & Yang, 2018). Despite government censorship, the Chinese #MeToo movement has exposed the patriarchal power in higher education and raised awareness about the continuing sexual violence within Chinese society.

The above stories invite reflection. Can equity be measured by figures alone? Did Chinese women's increased participation in higher education and high academic achievements result in equal participation in the labour market and bring them welfare and equity? What are the obstacles females continue to face on campus and at their workplaces? This study is conceived in the context of neoliberal statistics-based claim of gender equity, the dominant narrative of gender assimilation in China, and Chinese women's resistance to patriarchy. Under such a backdrop, more qualitative inquiries should be made to explore the nuanced issues of gender equality and equity in females' experiences with employment and academic development in China, a country with the largest population in the world.

## **1.2 Background and Rationale**

A review of existing literature reveals that gender discrepancy in education in China is often discussed together with the development of the economy and employment (for instance, Zhang & Chen, 2014; Lee, 2014). Socio-economic and cultural background, used as the main variables to understand gender disparity, has become a reoccurring theme in the current scholarship (Zeng, Pang, Zhang, Medina, & Rozelle, 2014; Hu, 2014). While some studies on the interrelations between gender, education, employment and fairness have demonstrated the existence and extent of gender inequality/inequity in Chinese higher education settings (Wang, Liu, Zhang, Shi and Rozelle, 2013; Wang, 2016; Liu, 2017; Guo, Tsang, and Ding, 2010), little attention has been paid to the actual experiences of women in higher education, and less still to the experiences of those who have been through application and interview processes in their efforts to secure employment in academia.

Receiving a doctoral degree abroad and/or becoming a college/university professor is among the highest education attainments one can aspire for. According to statistics published by the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China (2017a, 2018a) in the year 2017 and 2018, 48% of professors in higher education institutions were female, but no explanations were given concerning how many of them were full professors, associate professors, and assistant professors. Female undergraduate students in regular higher education institutions amounted to over 52% of the total undergraduate student number, while less (about 39% to 40%) female students are enrolled in Ph.D. programs (The Ministry of Education of the PRC, 2017b, 2018b).

Behind these figures, it is hard for us to see what is preventing Chinese women from pursuing doctoral study, what difficulties they have encountered and overcome to be admitted as faculty members in universities, and the experiences of female faculty members working in universities. In addition, there are no accounts about those who applied but failed to get academic positions in Chinese universities. These gaps in existing literature also beg academic considerations about the lived experiences of female scholars with high education achievements in their efforts to gain employment in academia. I believe there is an urgent need for qualitative studies to highlight the voices and lived experiences of Chinese females in higher education in contemporary time.

China has been initiating national projects to boost the development of higher education and forge world-class universities since the 90s. Launched in 1995, Project 211 aimed at strengthening the research abilities of over 100 national key universities and develop certain disciplinary areas to compete with peers in western countries (Li, 2004). In 1998, Project 985 was announced to promote the reputation of the Chinese higher

education system and build a group of globally high-ranking universities in the 21st century (World Education News and Reviews [WENR], 2006). The World First Class University and First Class Academic Discipline Construction project, also known as Double First Class, started in 2017 and was designed to forge eminent universities and departments in the world as the name of the project suggested (Department of Education, Skills and Employment of Australian government, n.d.; People's Daily Online, 2017). In all the above projects, Chinese government used research output and publications on world-recognized journals, especially in the field of sciences and engineering to evaluate tertiary institutions (WENR, 2006). As a result, Chinese universities have been actively seeking to hire foreign faculty as well as Chinese scholars educated abroad in English settings to increase the number of publications in English and on important platforms. Since education in English speaking programs is desirable due to measurable standards, the participation of internationally educated females in Chinese tertiary institutions is crucial to the understanding of high-achieving women and higher education.

The obsession with the economy and measurability is rooted in the dominant narrative in China, a country influenced both by neoliberalism and communist ideology. As is demonstrated by the white paper document introduced above, enrollment numbers are often used as the major indicator to claim equality. Actively indoctrinating the country with Marxism, the fixation on economic growth is implicit in school textbooks, media, and all forms of mainstream discourses. Fan (1997) suggests the following:

in Marxist theory the causality of the economic context takes primacy, leaving the concept of gender to be treated as a byproduct of changing economic structures...Marxists believed that once the oppressing class has destroyed, private

ownership and profit abolished, and the means of economic production redistributed as a whole, the oppression of women would disappear. (p. 304)

This study attempts to further the understanding of the interactions between gender equity and education. I am particularly interested in exploring how, with high educational attainments, women in contemporary China still fail to enjoy gender equality and equity with their male counterparts in the academy. To examine the complex issues around this topic, I narrow my focus on women with graduate degrees earned abroad and their experience in starting their professional careers in universities. In this case study, I focus on their narratives about how they went through the process, what difficulties have they met, and in what ways did they negotiate their identities during the transition.

The implications of this research are trifold. Firstly, it seeks to understand the connections between education and gender equity through individuals' lived experiences that epitomize such connections. Secondly, it adds the richness of female narratives and female epistemology and works toward the empowerment of women by attaching great importance to their knowledge. Thirdly, it interrogates the prevailing narrative "more education and more equal" and the larger project of neoliberal discourse centred in measurability and objectivity.

### **1.3 Purpose of this Study and Research Questions**

The failure to understand the reality of women academics' experiences in higher education works to reinforce and perpetuate inequities. It is, therefore, crucial to provide contemporary counter-narratives to the dominant narrative, and to add to the existing body of literature in-depth understanding of gender, education and social justice that appreciates the complexity of women's agency, gendered identity, choices of an



academic path, career trajectory and social lives. Although more and more Chinese women are enrolled in schools, colleges, and universities, it remains to be explored if females are equal with their male counterparts in enjoying human rights, opportunities to succeed in life, and exercising autonomy. This begs closer examination of women's education as well as their transition from being students in educational institutions to the labour market.

The purpose of this study is to explore gender equality and equity in China and women's intentionality and subjectivity by examining the experiences of Chinese women who have been educated abroad in seeking academic positions in Chinese education institutions. Participants included female Chinese international students in the final year of their graduate program in western countries or recently (within the past 10 years) graduated who have the experience of applying and being interviewed for academic positions in Chinese higher education institutions. Some of them have completed a graduate degree abroad and are working in Chinese higher educational institutes at the time of the interviews.

I selected these participants because their unique experiences of doctoral studies and transnational education experiences embodied high education attainment in the contemporary world, marginalized positions in society and the academe as women, and knowledge about both academic institutions and the labour market due to experiences with academic job applications. I am also curious about whether transnational education experiences have any effects on Chinese female international students' perspectives about their own identity as women and gender equity in social and academic contexts. In an era

of globalization and the neoliberal knowledge economy, they are well situated to provide insights into the research questions pertaining to this study.

The main research question for the study is “How do gender and international education background shape the experiences of internationally educated Chinese females in their efforts to find academic positions in China?” In examining this research question the following questions guided my study:

- 1) What are the experiences of internationally trained Chinese females in securing an academic position in China after their graduate study?
- 2) What challenges, including gender-specific challenges, did they confront in their search for an academic position and how did they navigate these challenges?
- 3) In what ways do they construct their sense of self as women throughout their experiences with higher education and finding academic jobs in China, and how (if at all) do they perceive western education having influenced their awareness of gender?

In line with the study’s focal point on women’s lived experiences and their perspectives, feminist standpoint theory worked as the overarching theoretical perspective of this study. Feminist standpoint theory and feminist thoughts highlight that the subordinate groups are more apt to understand social structure and power based on their positionalities in society and lived experiences. Accordingly, narrative enquiry served as the methodology of the study to make possible the examination of situated knowledge generated by each individual female scholar’s experience and social positions. Under the qualitative story-telling paradigm, this study employed semi-structured interviews to collect data. Each participant’s accounts of her experiences and answers to

questions related to her experiences were synthesized into an individual narrative for further interpretative analyses.

## **1.4 Self-Positioning of the Researcher**

As a Chinese woman, I obtained my Bachelor of Arts degree in Beijing and worked there for over six years before coming to Canada to pursue a Master's program in education. When I was an undergraduate student majoring in English language and literature, I was aware of how the university deemed the lack of male students as a crisis and lowered the threshold of entrance exam scores for men to recruit more males. And although the majority of the student body was women, the presidents, the deans, the entire leadership group, and higher-level professors were predominantly male. Later, working in a male-dominant state-owned company in the field of communication technologies that often cooperated with universities, I had countless opportunities to further contemplate the various forms of discrimination and constraints imposed on women in Chinese society, especially in academia and workplaces.

Interested in education, especially how it can make society more just and equal, I chose this topic due to my own academic curiosity, lived experiences, and continuous reflections on gender, higher education, and equity in contemporary China. I envision myself to have been equipped with the shared context and reality of Chinese women and a certain amount of academic knowledge to understand the participants, thus able to relate to them based on my own identity and experiences, and to talk and work with them instead of on them. In addition, I acknowledge that my interpretations enviably bare my own bias and worldview, which is in turn informed by my situated and embodied experience and beliefs. In this sense, by doing, thinking and writing up this research, I am

also attempting to answer the call standpoint feminism made to produce understandings and interpretations from my viewpoint.

My assumptions coming to this research were:

- Education and education institutions should work to promote social justice.
- Chinese women may have experienced and be prone to identify discrimination during the job application and interview processes.
- Gender-based bias and discrimination against female scholars exist in higher education institutions in China.
- Women's high educational attainment is, to some extent, a result of collective effort to gain more education capital so as to be able to compete with men.
- Transnational education experiences and exposure to conversations around gender equity in western countries may increase women's awareness of gender issues.

## **1.5 Overview of Chapters**

The goal of this study is to gather rich data about female scholars' experiences in finding academic positions in Chinese higher education institutions and offer thick descriptions of their narratives and in-depth analysis concerning gendered aspects in their experiences and their identity and autonomy during such processes. Chapter 1 contextualizes and rationalizes the objective of this study. Chapter 2 reviews existing literature on gender, higher education, employment, and academe in China, Asia, and wider contexts. Critiquing the gaps in the literature, Chapter 2 highlights the importance of qualitative examination of women's lived experience in academia. Chapter 3 provides the theoretical considerations and outlines the key concepts feminist thoughts and

feminist standpoint theory lend to this study. Methodological foundations, research design, participants inclusion, and research instruments of this case study are recounted in Chapter 4. Research findings are presented in the form of four individual narratives in Chapter 5. Chapter 6 discusses and analyzes the collected data through a critical lens and the interpretative framework and finally, the summary of the case study with suggestions for further exploration is presented in Chapter 7.

## Chapter 2

### 2 Literature Review

Boote and Beile (2005) regarded literature review as the foundation and guidance of research in which not only a summary of content but also critical analysis of methodology, implications, and the context of the domain should be carefully inspected. In this chapter, I attempt to consider existing literature related to my study by delving into methods, findings, connections, and controversy and positioning scholarly articles in a historical dialogue with one another.

I consider the theme of my study to be about the interactions between education, social transformation, and gender equity. Education is widely recognized as fundamental to human rights and an essential path to achieving social equity and narrowing gender disparity. But the correlation between education and the improvement of women's socio-economic status in the era of globalization and neoliberalism has long been contested. Slaughter and Rhoades (2004) argued that in the age of information and marketization, higher education actively participated in commercialized activities by viewing knowledge as commodity, students as customers, and pursuing profit as the objective of education. The shift from common good to competition and commodification has resulted in "academic capitalism" (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004) that reshape higher education and the experiences of students and academics.

Given that this study is about women's experiences in Chinese higher education institutions, I start by accounting for the recent research about gender and higher education in China and in doing so, demonstrate the insufficiency of quantitative approaches in exploring the issue of gender equity. Following this, I consider gender,

education, and employment in Asian countries and try to situate China against the backdrop of vast socio-cultural changes in the broader region. In the last section, I tease out debates and consensus in the global discourse around gender and higher education and then turn to studies about female faculty in Chinese universities.

## **2.1 Gender and Higher Education in China**

Academic studies focusing on educational attainment and gender disparity in China provide differed perspectives. Identifying the contradictions provided by existing studies regarding whether gender discrimination persists in higher education, Liu and Li's (2010) analysis into statistics-based literature proposed that gender-based discrimination against women in higher education is manifested in multiple aspects: limited access to higher education for females due to gender stereotypes and poverty, gender segregation and restriction to certain subject and specialization, unequal distribution of educational resources, underrepresentation of women and dearth of gender consciousness, gender imbalance in student organizations and activities, campus culture, and employment opportunities.

Similarly, Zeng, Pang, Zhang, Medina, and Rozelle (2014) conducted a meta-analysis using empirical data presented by previous studies concerning gender inequality in education since the 1980s to address the mixed evidence in previous literature and the lack of "reliable, comprehensive, disaggregated nationwide data" (p. 478) in China. They found a decreasing trend of gender inequality and that women's educational opportunities have been improved dramatically. According to Zeng et al. (2014), although gendered vulnerabilities still exist in contemporary China, it mainly concentrated on women from

rural areas. The discrepancy between men and women has almost disappeared in urban areas, with girls seemingly enjoying more educational opportunities.

The educational expansion that has taken place in China since the 1990s leading to increased representation of women in higher education has also drawn considerable academic attention. Zhang and Chen (2014) questioned the assumption of a positive correlation between education expansion and equal higher educational opportunities for women and men. To test the dynamics among gender equality in receiving higher education, education expansion, family background, and socio-geographical locations, Zhang and Chen (2014) processed survey data collected in 2008 concerning gender, demography, and education retrieved from Chinese national database with statistical software, and claimed that the expansion maintained the fact that urban girls have better access to education than urban males while mitigating the disadvantages confronting rural women from economically disadvantaged families in obtaining higher education, and therefore in general reduced gender inequalities. They predicted that despite the existing disadvantages for women living in rural areas to access higher education, such disadvantage would be “eliminated with the continuous progress of urbanization and urban-rural integration” (Zhang & Chen, 2014, p. 17).

A decade after the start of Chinese education expansion, concerned with the impacts of the expansion and the effectiveness of national policies aiming at equality, Wang, Liu, Zhang, Shi and Rozelle (2013) surveyed the gender, ethnicity, economic and household registration status of first-year students in four tier-one colleges between year 2008 and 2009, roughly the same period with Zhang and Chen’s (2014) research data. Unlike Zhang and Chen’s (2014) optimism, however, Wang et al. (2013) pointed out that rural



women were underrepresented while urban women were not. And poor, rural, minority women were the most severely marginalized group, unable to benefit from education expansion or equality policies (Wang et al., 2013). Wang et al. (2013) then contended, as they entitled their research, that “college is a rich, Han, urban, male club” that needed institutional reform to promote equity. Commenting on Wang et al. (2013), Hu (2014) argued that there were pitfalls in the evaluation model and potential sampling errors in the research by Wang et al. (2013). In a reassessment, Hu (2014) asserted that “only household registration status is significantly associated with the likelihood of attending college, while gender, economic status, and ethnicity are not” (p. 1129). Hu (2014) then contended that higher education recruitment is not necessarily unfair.

More recently, McGarry and Sun (2018) took interest in the effects of one child policy and compulsory schooling laws alongside economic growth and education expansion. By analyzing multi-generational data collected by a national survey in 2011 on a large number of Chinese households, McGarry and Sun (2018) decided that economic growth, populational and educational policies benefited both genders in educational attainment, and particularly women, who were receiving more education than men; while policy tended to exert larger effects on rural populations. Though differences in schooling by region (urban or rural) and gender persisted, the gaps between women and men in education opportunities have decreased substantially (McGarry & Sun, 2018).

While the claims found in existing scholarship remain inconsistent and contentious, the inconsistency again illustrates the limitations of quantitative research and the overemphasis on access to education. Some researchers have taken an angle from policies to examine the dynamics between education expansion and gender parity. For example,

Liu (2017), adopting a mixed method approach consisting of surveys and interviews with female university students, found that women born under the one-child policy were more likely than all other groups (male students and female students who are not the only child) to have higher education attainments regardless of their family background, with urban students having twice as much representation in higher education as, and exponential advantages over rural students. Liu (2017) further observed from interviews that female students from single-child families tend to have higher academic and career aspirations. To overcome the inequalities against women in Chinese society, female students would seek membership in the Communist Party of China as a way to maximize their chance of success (Liu, 2017).

As is evident from the above discussion, a reoccurring topic in the literature regarding gender equality and education is the distinct rural-urban disparity in China. While it is unanimous that women in rural areas are the most underprivileged demographic group, few studies focused on the experience of rural women in education, fewer have paid due attention to their voice. Wang's (2016) qualitative study shed light on discriminations in policy, society, and education institutions facing rural women in higher education, and how they understood and navigated constraints and barriers by pursuing academic excellence and reformulating their identities as they trespassed the different rural and urban and academic and domestic contexts.

Another important topic about gender equity in higher education is the underrepresentation of women in STEM subjects. Analyzing nation-wide survey data of college students who graduated in 2005, Guo, Tsang, and Ding (2010) concluded that female students outperformed their male counterparts academically in science and

engineering programs although women fell behind in the enrollment in these programs. Nevertheless, male science and engineering graduates enjoyed many advantages in the job market such as higher employment rate, higher starting salary, better career prospects, etc. (Guo et al., 2010). From a more qualitative perspective, He (2018) aimed to dissect the social and institutional factors that discouraged female students from choosing STEM subjects, and discovered that the configuration of exam-oriented science curriculum, limited support from teachers, implicit discrimination against women in STEM-related job market, parents' stereotypical expectations for girls, and peer influence worked together to push women out of STEM subjects (He, 2018).

Many researchers along the history of modernization of Chinese education have inquired into the educational gender gap from the perspective of the growth and requirements of the labour market. Some have noted the progress made in reducing gender inequalities in China due to women's participation in the job market. Based on official statistics of population, school enrollment and employment from 1988 to 2008, Lee (2014), for instance, asserted that the economic development, together with national educational and demographical policies, had contributed to the decrease in gender gaps in education during the past decades in China. Does the increase in education opportunities necessarily lead to women's gain in social, economic, and cultural status? Studies focusing on China seem to provide partial answers to this question. Therefore, to better explore the question aforementioned, in the following section, I try to situate China in the larger context of Asia and review the literature concerning gender, education, and employment in Asian countries that share not only geographical proximity but also developmental and/or cultural similarities to a certain extent with China.

## 2.2 Gender, Education, and Employment in Asia

Scholars have collectively noticed in recent decades a global trend of education expansion and smaller gender differences concerning access to education at all levels as is illustrated by the increased representation of females in schools and tertiary education institutions in many nations. This trend is particularly conspicuous in Asian regions, such as China, Japan, Korea, Mongolia, Iran, and India, where gender differences in access to education used to be dramatic. Hence, existing literature that has taken up the theme of gender and education often delves into the effects of industrialization and socio-economic developments.

Employing a comparative history/sociology approach, Nozaki, Aranha, Fix Dominguez, and Nakajima (2009) juxtaposed descriptive statistics collected from Japan, Mongolia, and India to consider changes and status of women's higher education in the face of development of education system, and how such changes and status affected women's employment and roles in the traditional institutions of marriage and families. They suggested that while a gender gap in higher education remained in Japan and India, education in Mongolia witnessed a reverse gender gap on all levels; gender segregation by fields of study prevailed in all three countries where women excelled in social science, arts and humanities, and education while lagging behind in science, engineering, manufacturing, and construction (Nozaki et al., 2009). Furthermore, Nozaki et al. (2009) offered insights into the discriminatory job market and the constraining tradition that continued to assign family and marriage as the major female domain, and warned readers against the "limitations of using the notion of the higher education gender gap as a lens

for assessing the degree of equal, or unequal, gender relations socially, culturally, and structurally” (p. 244).

Rezai-Rashti (2011), through a historical look into the social reform and educational development in Iran, explored the (lack of) connections between higher education and women’s participation in the labour market building on both quantitative and qualitative data. The main research finding of Rezai-Rashti’s (2011) corroborated Nozaki’s et al. (2009) and Sinha Mukherjee’s (2015) studies in that Iranian women’s escalated access to higher education did not translate into improved employment opportunities, and indicated that shortage of social capital such as network and family connections, the glass ceiling in career development, and restraints from religious ideology and norms played influential roles in women’s employment. Notably, Rezai-Rashti’s (2011) special attention to female employment in universities exposed that women’s opportunities to obtain teaching, managerial, and administrative positions and publications were increasing at a low rate that were disproportionate to women’s access to receiving higher education. In a later in-depth quest into what university education means to Iranian women, Rezai-Rashti and Fereidouni (2019) further suggested that females attended universities due to the scarcity of other career options, hope to gain employment and social status, and strong support from family. Furthermore, access to higher education has unexpectedly brought women opportunities to be socially active, leverage to bargain with patriarchy, as well as new understandings about gender relations (Rezai-Rashti & Fereidouni, 2019).

In a similar vein, Sinha Mukherjee (2015) disrupted the misconception of “more educated and more equal” regarding gender equality and access to education by making comparisons among women’s education and employment in contemporary Japan, China,

and India. Sinha Mukherjee's (2015) arguments, echoing those of Nozaki et al. (2009), revealed that women in all three countries still experience inequalities in education and employment and the pressure from social norms regardless of their increased representation in higher education. In further inspections on gender gaps in education, Sinha Mukherjee (2015) identified shared patterns of female underrepresentation at advanced educational levels and fields of Science and Technology, gender wage gap, segregation of labour markets, implicit biases and explicit discrimination against women, inconsistency in women's employment duration, and heavier domestic responsibilities in the three countries. Specifically, in China, age limits and covert discrimination in academia together with the absence of family support, the significance attached to marriage versus education, worked together to restrict women from pursuing higher education attainments (Sinha Mukherjee, 2015). Sinha Mukherjee (2015) therefore poignantly pointed out that education is not necessarily associated with improvement in other aspects of women's social life.

If "the dominant narrative (which works to suggest that education leads to the empowerment of women) cannot be trusted" (Sinha Mukherjee, 2015, p. 866), how then can we understand gender, education, and employment? Adopting an interdisciplinary analytical framework approach, Cooke's (2010) cross-national comparative studies about China, India, Japan, and South Korea intended to "provide a more comprehensive explanation of the wide range of factors that shape women's employment opportunities and outcomes" (p. 2250). Cooke (2010) illuminated that although progress has been made in each country, women still lagged far behind in the labour market in various aspects such as lower participation, irregular employment, discriminative hiring practices,

segregation in certain fields, wage gaps, and underrepresentation in leadership positions. This reiterates the research findings discussed in this section previously. Explaining the ways in which women's high educational attainment fails to translate into economic empowerment through increased participation in the labour force, Cooke (2010) elaborated on the effects of obstinate traditional gender value and norms, employers strategic discriminative practices targeting women, ineffective enforcement of equal opportunity law and legislation, and absence of unions and organizations to represent female workers. Recognizing China as the country where gender segregation is perhaps the least pronounced and the gender wage gap appeared to be the smallest among the four countries considered, Cooke (2010) emphasized that "the newly found employer power as a result of marketization and globalization of the Chinese economy has reversed some of the gender equality trends achieved during the state planned economic period, resulting in the resurgence of gender discrimination" (p. 2266).

The particularities about China observed by researchers invite us to consider education, employment and the empowerment of Chinese women more closely, and inspect accounts offered by academic studies. Li and Zhang (2010), crunching data from the placement offices of two top 30% colleges in 2005, declared that female unemployment rate was lower than that of males and female graduates were more likely to obtain high salary jobs because female college students tended to have higher GPAs. Li and Zhang (2010) claimed that not only did employers not discriminate females with high GPAs, the hiring discrimination against women in the job market almost did not exist. They therefore insisted that there was a "surprising gender employment gap favoring female graduates" (p. 38), and that gender discrimination played less important a

role in women's employment than the access to higher education, household registration status, and family background (Li & Zhang, 2010). The scope and research methods of Li and Zhang's (2010) study being limited and their data not as informative or representative, their claim about gender discrimination building solely on statistics appears simplistic and worth further interrogating.

Others have attempted to study gender disparities across different occupations. He and Zhou (2018), for example, were concerned about the potential causes of gender segregation in different occupational areas. Based on data collected by survey and follow-up interviews of students from 15 universities in Beijing, He and Zhou's (2018) inquiry into college-to-job transition and early occupational attainment demonstrated that while the underrepresentation of women in science and engineering explained male domination in professional or technical positions, study field was not the only reason explaining gender disparities in occupations. Instead, gender norms were most influential both concerning the perception and treatment of women and men from the employer's part, and also about students' choice of major, career prospects, and behaviour patterns (He & Zhou, 2018). Besides, individual women's exposure to egalitarian gender ideas in college could help increase their chances of becoming managers and professionals (He & Zhou, 2018).

## **2.3 Gender and Employment in Academia**

The academe is arguably one of the most prominent intersections of higher education and employment. Gender discrimination in academe in various spheres, forms, and regions around the world has been documented by a large body of scholarly writers. In the year 2017, Savonick and Davidson started an initiative to aggregate research



articles on gender bias in academia. They collected, compiled, and invited interested individuals to add to the collection of related articles, creating an annotated bibliography on this topic. When I came across their initiative during the research process for my study, I realized that many of the articles I found previously overlapped with the papers in the annotated bibliography (Savonick & Davidson, 2017), which has since become a great resource for me. In this section, I first draw upon Savonick and Davidson's (2017) work and literature I gathered in an attempt to summarize the themes and major findings in the research literature about gender and academia that are related to my study.

Considering the scope of this study, my review of literature will not focus on race, queer, disability, and those that published decades ago. I acknowledge the significance of these topics and studies and encourage readers to turn to and contribute to the work of Savonick and Davidson (2017). Following the summary of the contemporary global dialogue about gender and academe, I review articles about gender issues in Chinese academia, mainly focusing on female academics' experiences with higher education institutions.

Barriers in women's access to and promotion in academia is a frequently debated issue. Moss-Racusin, Dovidio, Brescoli, Graham, and Handelsman (2013) discovered that both male and female science faculty hold implicit or unintentional bias against female undergraduate students, illustrated by deeming females less competent than males with same application material and willing to allocate more support and resource to male candidates. Milkman, Akinola, and Chugh's (2015) psychological study showed that professors in almost all disciplines (humanities, business, education, life sciences, social sciences, etc.) except for fine arts, were more likely to respond to letters of interest signed

by names that appeared to be of white men, with the largest discrepancy occurring in the field of business. Other researchers begged to differ. According to Williams and Ceci's (2016) hiring experiments, both female and male faculty members in biology, engineering, economics, and psychology preferred female tenure-track applicants by a ratio of 2:1 (preference of women over men). They argued that the underrepresentation of women in tenure-track positions in STEM was mainly due to fewer applications (Williams & Ceci, 2016).

A conspicuous theme is the gender gap in scholarly publications and citations, which is closely related to tenure and promotion. West, Jacquet, King, Correll, and Bergstrom (2013) in a cross-disciplinary analysis of more than 8 million papers in natural sciences, social sciences, and humanities, discovered that there were fewer female single-authored papers whilst more men as first and correspondent authors. Having scrutinized 1,021 articles published in a communication science journal between 1991 and 2005, Knobloch-Westerwick and Glynn (2013) concluded that articles authored by female communication scientists received fewer citations. Maliniak, Powers, and Walter's (2013) investigation into data from publications in International Relations illuminated the same pattern that women were cited less and tended to cite themselves less than men. King, Bergstrom, Correll, Jacquet, and West's (2015) study on 1.6 million papers in the database JSTOR reiterated that in almost all academic fields, women were less likely to cite their own research than men.

Another aspect that matters for development in academic careers is gender bias in students' evaluation of teaching quality. MacNell, Driscoll, and Hunt (2015) concealed the gender by asking a female and a male instructor to each use a feminine and a

masculine name in the online anthropology/sociology course they gave to two classes. The student evaluation result showed that the actual gender was irrelevant when it came to the rating. The marks given to the masculine name were higher than that of the feminine one, and the marks given to the feminine name with perceived feminine style in teaching were higher than that of the feminine name combined with masculine ways of teaching (MacNeill et al., 2015). Miles and House (2015), looking at 30,000 students' assessment results of 255 professors, uncovered that women teaching larger lecture classes received substantially lower student teaching evaluation scores although they were as efficient as their male counterparts. Boring, Ottoboni, and Stark (2016) revealed the gravity and complexity of gender bias: depending on factors such as discipline and student gender, bias affected students' evaluation so severely that effective instructors could get lower evaluations.

More explicit forms of gender discrimination against women in higher education include the motherhood penalty and workplace harassment. Mason, Wolfinger, and Goulden's (2013) analysis of data collected over decades in the United States shed light on marginalization, barriers in promotion, scarcity in academic mentorship, female role models, and funding, together with higher levels of stress experienced by female faculty. Looking beyond these phenomena, Mason, Wolfinger, and Goulden's (2013) explored how responsibilities for housework and family care, and "the baby penalty" in academia in particular, which meant female academics who were mothers were far less likely to receive tenure than childless women or men, had resulted in constraints in female scholars' career trajectories. Considering the prevalence and gravity of workplace harassment in higher education, Hennin et al. (2017) conducted a systematic literature

review that identified gender discrimination as the most common cause for harassment, which was found at all levels and among all disciplines. Hennin et al. (2017) analyzed the standards used to measure harassment, suggestions on interventions to address harassment, and the consequences and symptoms of harassment in existing research. In addition, Hennin et al. (2017) described the absence of studies conducted in South America, Oceania, and Asia.

One of the most discussed topics concerning inexplicit discrimination against women is institutions' gendered expectations for women to take on more service work, also known as "academic housework" (Guarino & Borden, 2017; Heijstra, Steinhorsdóttir, & Einarsdóttir, 2017) than men. Based on survey data from faculty of a large number of North American universities, Guarino and Borden (2017) found that female faculty perform more service to the university, department, and campus than men in all departments. Guarino and Borden (2017) argued that women are "taking care of the academic family" without being recognized or rewarded by salary or promotion and called for institutions to pay more attention to females' invisible and supportive labour and devote efforts to promote gender equity. In an Icelandic context, Heijstra et al. (2017) analyzed empirical data collected from a research university and concluded that women and newcomers to the academe were most likely to shoulder more service work. Women faculty, in particular, spent significantly more time and energy in teaching, administrative work, community work, and gender equality initiatives that were undervalued and overlooked by universities (Heijstra et al., 2017).

In the literature I gathered about China, there are both similar themes that corroborate findings in the international body of literature and particularities that

illustrate the contextual nature of the topic of gender in higher education. Gaskell, Eichler, Pan, Xu and Zhang (2004), concerned about changing situations of women faculty in the increasingly globalized environment, surveyed faculty members from five Chinese normal universities and concluded that women fell behind in higher-rank positions, devoted more time to teaching and less to research than men, and demonstrate less ambition while admitting they had to make much more efforts than men if they want to achieve the same. The most striking finding of Gaskell et al. (2004) was the high degree of acceptance of essentialist ideas that gender difference is biologically among both gender and all age cohorts, but more pronounced for men and in the younger age group. Gaskell et al. (2004) then insightfully suggested that the Marxist ideology of gender sameness in public sphere did not allow space for women to explore and change their own situations.

In the context of China today, beliefs in the nurturing, supportive and sexual characteristics of women legitimize pushing women in universities into support roles and into teaching, while in the family they underpin women's roles as primary care giver. Until ideologies about women are broadly challenged within China, Chinese women professors remain ambivalent about leadership roles and men are unlikely to be supportive of change (Gaskell et al., 2004, p. 527).

Zhang's (2010) mixed-method inquiry looked at the various sources of stress confronting academics in Chinese research universities and revealed that besides the pressure caused by competition that affected both men and women in academia, women experienced higher levels of stress due to organizational marginalization in higher education institutions, social stereotypes and gender discrimination, and difficulties in

fulfilling both academic and family roles. Zhang (2010) also suggested that the lack of mentors and female role models, being excluded from male dominated networks and often assigned supportive tasks, and a sense of higher responsibility for children and family were the most articulated sources of pressure among women academics.

Similar themes can be found in Rhoads and Gu's (2012) qualitative feminist standpoint study about women's experiences as faculty members in a research university in China. It revealed female faculty's shared dilemma in trying to juggle family responsibilities and work with little help from their spouses, obstacles in advancing their academic career, and social exclusion from the network of males. Interestingly however, male faculty in this study tended to be ignorant about challenges their female colleagues face and believe that men and women were equal in China because of communist gender ideology, while female faculty expressed a sense of belonging and solidarity with their male counterparts, which Rhoads and Gu (2012) also related to "communist tradition of workers in the same organization being tied together" (p. 745).

## **2.4 Conclusion**

As is evident from the previous discussion, female faculty members in Chinese universities are much less studied compared with their counterparts in western countries. Quantitative methods are much more prevalent than qualitative methods to understand women's experiences with gender discrimination in Chinese higher education. Furthermore, in the review of existing literature about gender and higher education in China, I was only able to find one study that adopted feminist standpoint theory to look at the experiences of Chinese women in tertiary education institutions, i.e. Rhoads and Gu (2012). Such gaps in the existing literature invite due scholarly attention to women's lived

experiences in higher education in the era of globalization. Taking a path less trodden, this qualitative study explores the experiences of internationally trained female scholars concerning the very mechanism that admits them in or keeps them out of Chinese higher education institutions. Through feminist standpoint theory and narrative inquiry, my research attempts to better understand what challenges female academics face during the processes of recruitment to academic positions in China and how gender and international education background may have shaped their experiences regarding obtaining an academic position.

In the following chapter, I elaborate on the theoretical framework, feminist thoughts and feminist standpoint theory, that guided this study.

## **Chapter 3**

### **3 Theoretical Considerations**

This study is conceived and conducted under the framework of feminist standpoint theory. It draws its theoretical underpinnings, as well, substantially from feminism, or rather, feminist thoughts as epistemological lenses of research design, interpretations, and analyses. I use theories and thoughts in plural forms here intentionally as a way to demonstrate the complexity, richness, and the dynamic nature of feminist ideas. In this chapter, I intend to articulate key feminist thoughts pertaining to this study and provide connections between the study per se and the theories that I am drawing on. I start by briefly introducing feminism and feminist thoughts this study is indebted to. Then I concentrate on accounting for feminist standpoint theory, which work as the main theoretical perspective for this study. Following this, I elaborate on the implications of the aforementioned theoretical frameworks in this study.

#### **3.1 Feminist Thoughts**

Feminism, or feminist theory, as the focus of discussion of this chapter, is undoubtedly an umbrella term that contains heterogeneous ideas and conceptions that centre the social construction of gender. Albeit that the three waves of feminism along with a plurality of feminist events have made it into major news and public knowledge, the many conversations and debates within and around feminism bear more nuances. I do not see the need here to explain the history of social, political and academic movements of feminism, or to expound on the diverse views held by feminists such as liberal feminism, socialist feminism, radical feminism, post-structuralism, and postmodernism,



etc. (Eagleton, 2003). What I do think important to discuss is the rationality of feminist ideas adopted to facilitate this study.

The variant ideas clustering around feminism often lead us to question, what counts as feminist theory? And further, what are the feminist theories that are applicable to a specific inquiry? In her article “Whose Counting?”, Ahmed (2000) pointed out that works revolving around feminism emerged in different times and different locations and were produced in different ways. According to Ahmed (2000), theory is not static in space or time or fixed in meaning but instead mobile and contingent. For theories to count as feminism, linkage among different places and to broader social projects that generates collectivity and solidarity are necessary (Ahmed, 2000). As Ahmed (2000) argued:

Thinking about feminist theorizing as the acts produced by subjects who are on the move, but who aren’t moving freely, reminds us that feminist theorizing is “in the world” that it seeks to transform, and is hence implicated in the transnational flow of objects, images, and peoples across national borders. Feminist theorizing involves challenging the local through and in relation to the transnational. (p. 100)

It is, therefore, my primary consideration to make use of relevant feminist thoughts that were developed along the history, in specific social contexts, by multiple feminist thinkers, and are ready to transcend geographical locations. This study positions internationally trained women’s experiences at the centre of its inquiry. Undoubtedly, the collective works of feminist standpoint theorists, to which the next section is dedicated, are most relevant to such an inquiry into embodied knowing. But before expatiating on feminist standpoint theory at length, I acknowledge the following works as crucial theoretical components that my study builds on.

Feminist ideas about material conditions and labour, and in particular ideas that provide understanding on labour that is often overlooked, have guided my conceptualization of women's daily life and their efforts in job application as is explored in this study. In her groundbreaking case study on female flight attendants' daily jobs, Hochschild (1983) examined the invisible emotional work that had become a significant part of professional women's routine tasks. Hochschild (1983) poignantly articulated that women, as a group marginalized into lower social status than men, confronted more emotionally charged challenges in public and professional places. Females have to borrow from their domestically related images, often wives and mothers, to establish rapport and authority in their interaction with the workplaces and career lives and are more vulnerable to commercialization, exploitation, and estrangement (Hochschild, 1983). Dowling (2012) encapsulated the affective and embodied labour performed by a waitress in doing service work with fascinating autoethnographic self-narrative writing. With Dowling's (2012) creative representation, a waitress was animated into life, and the nature and intricacies of affective labour, the body that executes and interacts with the material world, and the subjectivity that struggled to make sense, all came vividly to life. Following this line of thinking, I recognize that women's way of knowing is closely related to material conditions and I attempt to take women's emotions and embodied feelings into my analytical considerations.

While the slogan "the personal is political" in feminism constitutes a potent perspective for us to understand social structure and power, the accessible ways to effectively extract critical knowledge from the seemingly mundane and trivial incidents remain oftentimes elusive. Ahmed's (2017) work *Living a Feminist Life* penetrated the

surface of messy and inarticulate daily life and illustrated the mechanisms of power in social institutions and the texture of feminism in contemporary world based on her experience as a feminist and a woman of colour, and on her experience doing academic and diversity work in higher education institutions. I first encountered this book during my first year as a graduate student. And it has since become my companion text that offered prolific and effective ways for my endeavour to learn, to lay out my graduate research project, and to make meaning of this project. This study borrows concepts from Ahmed (2017) and applies them to the analysis of research data, which will be discussed in detail in the discussion chapter.

The significance for feminism to include, integrate and actively collaborate with all marginalized people with intersectional social positionalities has been well-argued and understood. Among the many valuable resources on this topic is Ortega's (2006) argument that even well-intended attempts from the relationally privileged group to include the underprivileged could lead to simplistic, homogenized, and appropriated misunderstandings. She termed this “arrogant perception” as “lovingly, knowingly Ignorant”, and calls for white feminists to travel out of their circle and to learn about the third world women by getting to know them in person and remain introspective (Ortega, 2006). In the initial stage of this study, I celebrated the belief that my study is an opportunity for its participants to voice their opinions and emotions and to be heard and recorded. I soon realized that women who join this study are the ones who made efforts to educate people about what they knew and how they felt. As the researcher, I conducted the interviews with appreciation, reciprocity, and honesty. I also tried my utmost to be respectful and sensitive in the analyses and discussions of the research findings, to avoid

ignorance on my part, and to consciously engage with the judgments and feelings shared by the participants.

### **3.2 Feminist Standpoint Theory**

Feminist standpoint theory (FST) considers marginalized groups to be better situated to understand social structure and power. This concept has guided my own study in recognition of women's positions in the society and academia as lower in the hierarchy. FST has been developed by a group of scholars in various disciplines including Dorothy Smith and Patricia Hill Collins in sociology, Sandra Harding in philosophy of science, Nancy Hartsock and Alison Jaggar in political philosophy, Donna Haraway and Hilary Rose in natural science, and Alison Wylie in philosophy. Because feminist standpoint has been thought of in several different disciplinary contexts, Harding (2004a) proposed that it may be referred to in the plural form. In this chapter, however, I discuss FST as a collective theoretical endeavor whose essence Harding (1992) neatly captured:

Standpoint epistemology sets the relationship between knowledge and politics at the center of its account in the sense that it tries to provide causal accounts—to explain—the effects that different kinds of politics have on the production of knowledge. (p. 444)

The emergence of FST in contemporary academia can be traced back to the 1970s and 1980s (Harding, 2004a), when several feminist thinkers tried to interrogate the politics and structure of society and “explain how the structural relationship between women and men had consequences for the production of knowledge” (Harding, 1992, p. 442). These feminist thinkers gleaned insights from Hegel's thoughts on the consciousness of the oppressed in the master/slave dialectic, and the ideas of Marx,

Engels, and Lukacs on the "standpoint of the proletariat" (Harding, 1992, p. 442) to conceptualize the marginalized, as women were in gender relations, as an advantageous epistemic position for understanding the world and facilitate social changes. Drawing on these ideas, I designed my study as a project to value women's knowledge, to learn and think with the marginalized, and to recognize women's efforts to change the society.

Dorothy Smith (1974, 1987, 1999) revealed that the established conceptual frameworks in sociology favoured the abstract and detached masculine way of understanding society – a way that is also analogous to the ways in which the dominant social groups were more prone to see and to maintain the status quo. Since men are in the dominant positions compared with women, the objectification of the standpoint of men has led to the skewed understanding of social relation that is based on the view of the "ruling" (Smith, 1987). Smith (1987) defined the "relations of ruling" as the mechanism that shapes, directs, and regulates our lives based on the gender division of labour and that is pervasive in social structures such as education, government, and professional organizations. She observed the political nature of education in the past that all the teachings, indoctrinations, and discipline "reproduce the values, orientations, and standpoints of the established powers in educational institutions" (Smith, 1999, p. 177-178). "The institutionalized practices of excluding women from the ideological work of society are the reasons we have a history constructed largely from the perspective of men, and largely about men" (Smith, 1987, p. 35). However, women's perspective can be systematically different from that of men due to females' domestic duties, their designated social role as caregivers, and their daily contact with the material world (Smith, 1974).

Women in sociology had to adopt “a bifurcation of consciousness” (Smith, 1974, p. 25, 27), traveling back and forth between two modes of knowing: one that roots in their immediate experience of the everyday world, another that brackets away interests as is required by the discipline of sociology (Smith, 1974). Such double consciousness affords women advantages to understand social life building on the experienced world as a source of knowledge (Smith, 1974). Accordingly, the dual levels of knowing female scholars experienced in the material world and academia illuminated the conception of this study. Smith (1974) criticized that the separation between the subject and the object of knowledge, akin to Marx’s idea of alienation, produces a false claim of objectivity that serves the purpose of governing and oppressing. She then advocates a women’s standpoint as a way to recognize the situated nature of knowledge and to understand the society from women’s direct experience of the everyday world (Smith, 1974).

Hartsock (1983a), drawing critically from Marxist conceptualizations on capitalism, class, and the duality of reality between “appearance and essence, circulation and production, abstract and concrete” (p. 35), took women’s activity in capitalist society as a starting point. Acknowledging the influence of Marxism in China, this study tries to situate Chinese higher education in both the local context of proletarianism and the global backdrop of internationalization and marketization, especially in the environment where social equity are under the neoliberal attack. Hartsock argued that the sexual separation of labour in society led to a structurally different pattern in women’s experiences: 1) a double labour for capitalist subsistence in which women produce both goods and surplus value, and the maintenance of home; 2) a relational construction of self as opposed to the abstract masculine way of self-fabrication (Hartsock, 1983a). Taking this argument

further, Hartsock (1983a) emphasized that a feminist standpoint is achieved through "both analysis and political struggle in a particular historical space" (Hartsock, 1983a, p. 48). Due to such material activities and sense of self, feminist standpoint builds on women's life experiences "form the basis of a specifically feminist materialism which can provide a point from which both to critique and to work against phallographic ideology and institutions" (Hartsock, 1983a, p. 50) and open possibilities for emancipatory projects.

Connecting standpoint ideas in different disciplines together, Harding (1986) brought FST into being. She contextualized the theoretical development and the social justice movements that advocated the "logic of a standpoint" (2004a, p. 3) and emphasized the significance for standpoint theory to be the ground for generating knowledge for the oppressed groups. According to Harding (2004a), the standpoint is not merely a point-of-view or a perspective intrinsic among all subordinated people, but instead "an achievement, something for which oppressed groups must struggle, something that requires both science and politics" (p.8). It is through this political struggle that knowledge of the oppressed can be created toward the objective of empowerment (Harding, 2004a). Harding (2004a) reiterated that FST is an epistemology, a social theory, a philosophy of science, and a methodology or method of research, and this too is the way that I see FST as informing the research. As specific standpoints both enable and limit our understanding, she refused to prescribe one best approach to science, and encouraged the pursuit of variant epistemologies and methodologies (Harding, 1986).

Feminist standpoint theory is built on the foundation of investigation of interplays between power and knowledge. I adhere to this claim and propose the academia as a

perfect site to interrogate power and the production of knowledge from a gendered perspective. Juxtaposing the respective perspectives of liberal, classical Marxist, and radical feminists, Jaggar (2004) recounted the historical and philosophical background of feminist theories and argued that socialist feminism and standpoint theory as the most “politically appropriate and theoretically illuminating” (p. 55) to produce knowledge from collective material, political, and scientific struggles. She also recognized that it is difficult for women to instantaneously alter the dominate masculine way of understanding reality (Jaggar, 2004). “Since women cannot transform reality alone, they must also find ways to work politically with men without being dominated by them” (Jaggar, 2004, p. 64). This idea is echoed by feminist standpoint theorists such as Smith (1974) and Harding (1992).

### **3.3 Feminist Objectivity**

One of standpoint theory’s major thesis is its challenge to the abstract objectivity that was traditionally used to ground and govern the production of scientific knowledge. Smith (1974) discussed the “view from the top” (p. 23) that bears no interest or implications with personal experience, and Hartsock (1983a) analyzed how “abstract masculinity” (p. 44) underpins the dichotomous construction of self/other, abstract/concrete, mind/body, culture/nature, etc. that essentially divides the world. Hartsock (1983b) advanced the argument that “[t]here are some perspectives on society from which, however, well-intentioned one may be, the real relations of humans with each other and with the natural world are not visible” (p. 117), and those at the bottom of societal hierarchies were better situated than those at the top to understand the world around them. This is why I chose to interview women applying for academic jobs as it



can be said that they are at the bottom of the academic hierarchy without yet having a permanent university position.

The most influential piece is probably Haraway's (1988) "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective", in which she eloquently argued that "feminist objectivity means quite simply situated knowledges" (p. 581). Haraway (1988) exposed the dilemma existing in previous feminist critique about scientific objectivity: radical constructivism which discredits every claim to scientific knowledge into a rhetorical practice, "a contestable text and a power field" (p. 577), and feminist critical empiricism that aims at a feminist version of objectivity that gives "faithful accounts of a 'real' world" (p. 579). According to Haraway (1988), feminist theorists should combine the two approaches and work towards an understanding that all vision is embodied and that "objectivity turns out to be about particular and specific embodiment" (p. 582), therefore objective visions may be achieved by acknowledging the contingency and the limitations of positions. She stressed that it is only through the mediation of a politics of positioning that the world is possibly seen:

I am arguing for politics and epistemologies of location, positioning, and situating, where partiality and not universality is the condition of being heard to make rational knowledge. These are claims on people's lives; the view from a body, always a complex, contradictory, structuring and structured body, versus the view from above, from nowhere, from simplicity. (Haraway, 1988, p. 589)

From this lens of situatedness and positioning, binary and simplicity should be avoided, interpretation and critical engagement are made possible, and accountable knowledge prevails over the obscure "god-trick" (Haraway, 1988). Synthesizing

objectivity and embodiment, Haraway (1988) highlighted that there is “no single feminist standpoint” (p. 590) and a collective position lends the possibility for a “view from somewhere” that is continuous, limited, and vulnerable. Consistent with this concept, I see the standpoints of the participants as fluid, plural and imperfect, but at the same time concrete and embodied. It is required that the object of knowledge is seen as “an actor and agent, not a screen or a ground or a resource” (p. 592). In her later work, Haraway (1997) summarized that “standpoints are cognitive-emotional-political achievements, crafted out of located social-historical-bodily experience” (p. 304).

In “Rethinking standpoint epistemology: What is 'strong objectivity'?", Harding (1992) poignantly pointed out that all attempts to know the world are socially situated, thus the objectivity and neutrality attached to scientific knowledge by the dominant societal institutions needed to be questioned. She endorsed women’s experience – rather than the falsely universal unbiased “god-trick” – as the ground of knowledge since it was less partial and more able to help with the understanding of the social structure. Harding (1992) insisted that subjects of knowledge are “embodied and visible” (p. 452), socially located as were the “multiple, heterogeneous and contradictory or incoherent” (p. 454) objects of knowledge. Most importantly, for standpoint theory, knowledge is generated by communities instead of individuals. By assembling the standpoints of individual participants together, I conceptualize them as a community in which divergence and inconsistency also served as ways to achieve reliable nuanced knowledge.

Strong objectivity requires “that the subject of knowledge be placed on the same critical, causal plane as the objects of knowledge” (Harding, 1992, p. 458). This idea can be found in Harding’s (1986) *The Science Question in Feminism*, in which she offered

insights about what she termed as “the objectivity debates” and addressed the importance of investigating the researchers’ positioning and relations between the researchers and the participants. Therefore, to achieve strong objectivity demands strong reflexivity and the researchers’ commitment to democracy-advancing projects. As the researcher, I have also been reflecting on my own standpoint and motivation in doing this research. Related thoughts on positionality and reflexivity are included in the first and last chapters.

### **3.4 The Outsiders Within**

In her article envisioning the margin as a site of resistance, bell hooks (1990) reconstructed movements through space and location as a choice to enter the center or to embrace the margin as a standpoint to voice refusal and nourish resilience. She recalled that her childhood living on the outskirts of town afforded her a way of seeing both from the inside and the outside (hooks, 1990). Life on the edge has since become for hooks (1990) a space to refuse oppression, to enjoy possibilities of knowing, to voice counterstories, and to use language as a “place of struggle” (p. 153-154). This is used in my analyses of the effort females made to be and develop in higher education and resist discrimination. hooks (1990) referred to the margin as both the place of repression and resistance for two reasons. First, the margin can be debilitating or even destructive but it opens up a radical space for the oppressed to see the domination more clearly and find alliance. Second, hooks (1990) called for the marginalized people, positioned in the social binarism as “the Other” and constituting the margin themselves, to refuse to be silenced and to reimagine and transform the space through speaking out their pain.

Collins’ (1986) reflection on the standpoints of black women, specifically black intellectuals in academia, as “outsiders within”, sketched out black feminist thoughts

produced from this marginality and how such a standpoint and its insights can inspire a type of “outsiders within sociology” (p. 29). I see the participants’ outsiders within positions in many ways, as women in a patriarchal society, as female scholars in the male-dominated academia, and as international students navigating two cultural contexts. Collins (1986) elaborated that from their outsiders-within positions in the society, Afro-American women have been expressing their wisdom about 1) the significance to define and value their own identities as a way to refuse the stereotypical labels inflicted on black women as a way of domination; 2) oppression that works through an either/or dualistic categorization and in intersectional ways based on the interlocking nature of such duality as race, gender, class, etc.; 3) black women need to stay in touch with their own culture, explore black female experience and the ways in which they negotiate interlocking oppressions they confront.

These three themes in black feminist thoughts illuminate not only the reality for black females and the society, but also the implications such thoughts have on sociology, particularly the process of knowledge production in sociology. In the discussion and conclusion chapters, I make connections between the narratives and the self-valuation of women and refute dichotomy by advocating nuance and depth of understanding. Akin to Smith’s concepts about women in sociology, Collins (1986) contended that black women had to assimilate a way of thinking that centres white male subjectivity and conform to the disciplinary norms, although embracing and acting according to such an insider’s point of view could be difficult or lead to the internalization of their subordination. Their struggle between disciplinary norms and their lived realities then make it easier for them to notice inconsistencies and anomalies (Collins, 1986).

One potent example she provided is that traditionally researchers in sociology study black women by reducing their lived experiences into a group of pre-defined variables such as “race, sex, years of education, father’s occupation” (Collins, 1986, p. 28), which is clearly objectifying women and constructing dichotomous differences. Black feminists recognized this as problematic and proposed an alternative “to move Black women's voices to the center of the analysis, to study people, and by doing so, to reaffirm human subjectivity and intentionality” (Collins, 1986, p. 28), which I view as the key concepts that led to this study.

Collins then concluded that researchers can tap into their own experiences as outsiders within, that “intellectuals learn to trust their own personal and cultural biographies as significant sources of knowledge” (Collins, 1986, p. 29). In this study, my personal experiences and knowledge as a Chinese woman pursuing international higher education, as an outsider within the patriarchal society and academia, worked as a foundation for my understanding and interpretation of the research data. Such an insider-within approach abandons the purportedly objective and unbiased approach and aims at a “balance between the strengths of their sociological training and the offerings of their personal and cultural experiences” to better understand the society (Collins, 1986, p. 29). Furthermore, such a balanced insider-within sociology is not exclusive to black females, it can be used by variant groups of minorities, and those in the dominant groups that feel unease for unentitled privileges.

### **3.5 Debates and Controversies**

Standpoint theory has been attracting both supports and critics ever since its early stage. As Wylie (2004) suggested:

Standpoint theory may rank as one of the most contentious theories to have been proposed and debated in the twenty-five-to-thirty year history of second-wave feminist thinking about knowledge and science. Its advocates as much as its critics disagree vehemently about its parentage, its status as a theory, and crucially, its relevance to current thinking about knowledge. (p. 339-340)

Since FST identifies marginalized social locations as epistemically privileged in understanding social structure and power, it is often confronted with the question of how to define social categories and justify a certain category's standpoint as better than others. The notion of situated knowledge has often caused anxiety about the evaluation of knowledge. The accusation that standpoint theory is adherent to essentialism and relativism constituted a prominent and reoccurring site of contention. Besides, one of the major sources of controversies was disciplinary debates among standpoint feminists themselves that often stemmed from unfamiliarity with one another's approaches. Beyond the contentions among western academics, scholars from nonwestern backgrounds sometimes experienced difficulties in applying FST to their own social context. Narayan (1989), for example, while acknowledging the values of standpoint theory, expressed the inconsistency she felt between Indian culture and FST's cannons. Admitting the differences between Chinese and western contexts where FST originated and developed, the examinations of this study centred the globalized modernity and the participants' transnational experiences that connected China and the world and bridged potential gaps. As the researcher, I tried my utmost to use FST's key conception about social location and contextuality carefully and reflexively in the Chinese context.

Even advocates of FST expressed skepticism. Hekman (1997) asserted that women are not a unitary group, thus the differences among women may generate diverse knowledge, making it harder to arrive at a “truth”. “If we abandon a single axis of analysis, the standpoint of women, and instead try to accommodate the multiple, potentially infinite standpoints of diverse women” (Hekman, 1997, p. 227), she contemplated, it would be impossible to differentiate among the multiplicity of standpoints and knowledges (Hekman, 1997). Hekman (1997) contended that neither Smith, Heartsock nor Harding has offered persuasive proof why the subjugated is apt to achieve less false understandings than the dominant or dealt with the challenge of differences among individual and groups of women, and that Collins’ conception of situated knowledge and the objective truths generated by black women is self-contradictory.

In response, Hartsock (1997) concisely yet powerfully pointed out that Hekman (1997) and other critiques left the Marxist tradition of FST out, and therefore neglected the essential point of FST which is to understand and make changes to power relations, rather than merely in a quest for a homogenous truth. The project of revealing the mechanism of power, can then only be achieved by situating individual experiences in a relational social context (Hartsock, 1997). Then the “subjects who matter are not individual subjects but collective subjects” (Hartsock, 1997, p. 244), and individuals must exist in particular social locations and interact with social forces. Eventually, the standpoint of the oppressed groups is achieved by conscious struggles, and is thus privileged epistemically. In this study, the shared act of seeking academic jobs in China

connected the participants as a collective that consciously interacted with higher education and brought the power dynamic into the spotlight.

Collins (1997) addressed FST as an interpretive lens to disentangle how knowledge maintains or remodels oppressive power. Hekman's (1997) critique, Collins (1997) commented, was decontextualized and depoliticized and failed to recognize that a social group is established by shared history and social vicinity, not by individual choices. She further suggested that comprehension about the intersectionality of individual's positions is used to explain the complexity of power in social groups, rather than to obscure truth due to personal differences. This study, therefore, was built on the collectivity of the participants and the specificity of the context, and considered the intersecting social positions of the participants as productive means to explore social power.

Harding (1997) stressed that there is no one simple truth that stays true forever, and Hekman's (1997) push towards truth and reality stems from a Eurocentric positivist administrator's point of view to manage and categorize diverse people. FST aims at explicating larger social structures by starting from the local, material, embodied experiences of those lower in the hierarchy (Harding, 2004b). More significantly, researchers should be aware that oppressed groups are often led to believe the "distorted representations of social relations produced by dominant groups" therefore "the perspectives of the oppressed cannot be automatically privileged as articulations of reliable claims" (Harding, 2004b, p. 31-32). Just as there is no typical or essential woman's life, "different women's lives are in important respects opposed to each other" because "thought that starts off from each of these different kinds of lives can generate less partial and distorted accounts of nature and social life" (Harding, 1992, p. 454). For



feminist standpoint projects to arrive at a group consciousnesses, it takes “liberatory political struggles” for the researcher’s part to achieve “the best conception of research”, not just recording what the oppressed claim or believe (Harding, 2004b, p. 31-32).

Wylie (2004) later recounted the debate around Hekman’s (1997) revisiting of FST and reiterated the necessity that “essentialist” and “automatic epistemic privilege” presumptions be avoided (p. 341). Developing critical consciousness is “a jointly empirical, conceptual, and social-political enterprise” (Wylie, 2004, p. 344) that reveals the specific epistemic relevance. In different circumstances, different epistemic virtues need to be strategically adopted to maximize objectivity (Wylie, 2004). After this train of thinking, I aimed at integrating scientific methods, feminist concepts, and the purpose of promoting social changes into this study organically by adopting carefully-conceived research methods, critical social justice lens, and the conscious resistance against dominant neoliberal measurability.

In the next chapter, I explain considerations on the methodology informed by the theoretical underpinnings of the study and research ethics. Together with these, I provide detailed information on research methods and data collection devices.

## **Chapter 4**

### **4 Methodology and Methods**

The purpose of this study is to explore gender inequality and inequity by examining the experiences of Chinese females who have been educated abroad in seeking academic positions in Chinese education institutions. Based on a review of scholarly articles pertaining this topic, equality is used to suggest equal rights and opportunity without bias, and equity often denotes equal outcomes and achievement. The two terms, equality and equity, are inseparable in the discussions about gender-based discrimination and equal rights, and are indeed used interchangeably in various public discourses on social justice issues. It is expected that participants may use equality and equity in a more general and undifferentiated way. Accordingly, in this study, the two words equality and equity in this research, especially in the interview part, are considered to each and/or together indicate fairness, justice, equal opportunities, and equal achievements unless otherwise specified.

To obtain the above stated objectives, I undertook a qualitative study based on interviews with internationally-trained Chinese female academics. Adopting the narrative inquiry methods, this study aimed to learn from the lived experiences of research participants. Feminist Standpoint Theory informed the selection of methodology adopted by this study. It considers the standpoints of marginalized groups to be better positioned to understand social structures and power dynamics. And narrative inquiry centres personal experiences in specific social-historical locations as the source of knowledge. At the core of these two frameworks is the shared resistance against abstract “objectivity” and the belief that all knowledges are situated and embodied. Both the subjects and

objects of knowledge are socially constructed, and collective critical knowledge can be achieved by the interpretation of different and shared standpoints.

The main research question this study attempted to address is “How do gender and international education background shape the experiences of internationally educated Chinese females in their efforts to find academic positions in China?” In examining this research question the following sub-questions guided my study:

- What are the experiences of internationally trained Chinese females in securing an academic position in China after their graduate study?
- 2) What challenges, including gender-specific challenges, did they confront in their search for an academic position and how did they navigate these challenges?
- 3) In what ways do they construct their sense of self as women throughout their experiences with higher education and finding academic jobs in China, and how (if at all) do they perceive western education having influenced their awareness of gender?

In this chapter, I expound on methodology and the research devices of the study, and offer considerations about research ethics and trustworthiness in conducting this research. I start by explaining that qualitative research is an appropriate methodological underpinning for this study and elucidating the adoption of narrative inquiry in connection with the theoretical perspective. I then describe in detail the praxis how research data was collected and analyzed under the of narrative inquiry. Following this, I address ethical issues that guarantee due respect of research participants and their privacy and autonomy. Finally, I provide aspects that have been considered to ensure the

trustworthiness of the study regarding questions about validity and generalizability of narrative inquiry.

#### **4.1 Qualitative Research and Narrative Inquiry**

Qualitative methodology was used as an overarching research strategy to better understand the lived experience of present and former female Chinese international students in their transition to the job market. Scholars (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Merriam, 2009) have identified qualitative methodologies to work better with inquiries intended to explore and understand the meaning individuals or groups assign to issues, phenomena, and experiences. Qualitative methodologies therefore, best served my study considering the nature of my research and its core intention to challenge the quantitative assertions and to make sense of women's experiences embedded in the interlaced socio-political factors.

Informed by the purpose of the study and the theoretical perspective of feminist standpoint theory, I employed narrative inquiry to guide my research. Narrative inquiry is defined by Creswell and Creswell (2018) as a qualitative strategy to study individuals' lives by asking them to recount their lived experience as stories. Merriam (2009) traced the development of narrative analysis to the early 1990s when it first gained prominence as a way to understand the meaning of human experience (p. 32). Merriam (2009) further noted the significance of storytelling by stating "[s]tories are how we make sense of our experiences, how we communicate with others, and through which we understand the world around us" (p. 32). In fact, it is widely agreed that narrative, or storytelling, is a fundamental human activity to make sense of our experience and our relationship with the world, the society, cultures, ourselves, and others, and is thus a primary source of

knowledge for social science studies (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Conle, 2000; Kerby, 1991). The narrative approach, therefore, fits the purpose of my research in the way that it attempts to further the understandings on the conditions and sense of self of Chinese females in relation to their specific social context and educational background based on their own experiences.

Narrative inquiry has prolific implications with educational studies. Dewey's (1963) belief that education, experience and life are closely related has laid the foundation for consequent education researchers to follow the path of narrative. Clandinin and Connelly (1994) furthered Dewey's notion and indicated that "[o]ne learns about education from thinking about life, and one learns life from thinking about education" (p. 415). Conle (2000) provided thoughts on the various potential applications of narrative approaches in education research, teacher education, professional development, and curriculum. Olson (1995) focused on the possibilities to reshaping teacher education opened by adopting narrative ideas such as personal development and narrative authority. Beattie and Conle's (1996) collaborations with two teachers illustrate the reconstructing power of narrative in teachers' careers. From a perspective that teachers and learners are both storytellers and listeners, Riley and Rich (2012) pondered on spaces for narrative conceptions in pedagogical and curriculum and identified its implications in knowledge ownership and classroom dynamics. Following this line of thinking, this study has considerations in gender equity and gender justice, education and society, and careers and subjectivity of female academics. Participants were given the opportunity to tell their own stories that constituted a part of their life about which they have reflected upon and were able to make sense of, generating knowledge from their individual standpoints about their

experience and identities and ultimately about the society and social relations. This is also in alignment with FST in positioning women as knowers and source of knowledge.

## **4.2 Participants and Data Collection Methods**

Research interviews are a widely used tool of data collection in narrative inquiries (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). In this research, I interviewed Chinese females who are or used to be international students in Western countries and have experience looking for academic positions in China. I selected these participants since their unique experiences encapsulate the dynamics of performing womanhood, being knowers experiencing transnational education, and finding positions in the Chinese labour market. In an era of globalization and the neoliberal knowledge economy, they are better situated to provide insight into the research questions pertaining to this study. Another reason is due to my logistic location in Canada, which allowed me to recruit research participants who had transnational educational experience.

Participants were recruited by invitation and snowball sampling. Initially, a letter of information (LOI) outlining the details of the study and containing the contact information of the researcher was sent to known eligible participants based on the connections available in the Faculty of Education of Western University. (See Appendix B and C for a copy of the LOI and Consent Form.) The LOI asked the potential participants to join the research and/or recommend individuals they know that have similar experiences and may be interested in participating. Invitations were then to be sent to the recommended persons. Inclusion criteria to participate in the study were:

- a) Chinese females who had primary and secondary education in China

- b) Received (or receiving) tertiary education in English-speaking Western countries (e.g. Canada, United States, Britain, Australia, New Zealand)
- c) Have experience with being interviewed for an academic position in China in the last ten years
- d) Able to speak English

Considering the scope of the research and the close reading entailed by narrative analysis, four participants were selected for the study. All participants were under the ages of 40. They all applied and interviewed for academic jobs in China in the past four years. I hereby provide their basic information in a chart and introduce them briefly in alphabetical order.

**Table One: Information of the participants**

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Current Status</b>	<b>Academic Discipline</b>	<b>Ph.D. Location</b>	<b>Marital Status &amp; Children</b>
Shiwei	Faculty Member	Philosophy	U.S.	Married No children
Wenqi	Ph.D. candidate	Education	Canada	Married No children
Xiayue	Post-doctoral fellow	Education	Canada	Married One child
Zhengnan	Faculty Member	Science	UK	Married One child

The first participant was Shiwei who, at the time of the interview, had been working for over two years as a faculty member at a transnational research university in one of the largest cities in China. Following her undergraduate study in a top Chinese university,

she had lived in the United States for seven years; six of which were for her Ph.D. in philosophy. She was married and did not have children.

The second participant was Wenqi, who was a last year Ph.D. candidate in education in a Canadian institution at the time of the interview. She has been living in North America for more than nine years in which she did a Master's in the U.S., a second Master's in Canada, and continued to work on her Ph.D. program in Canada. She was married and did not have children as well.

The third participant was Xiayue, who was in the post-doctoral program in a prestigious university in a metropolitan in China when we did the interview and was going to be reviewed for a professor's position. She immigrated to Canada with her family and lived there for six years, where she obtained her Master's and Ph.D. degrees in education, before moving back to China to work there. She was married and had a child.

The fourth participant was Zhengnan, who was an associate professor at a major research university in southern China at the time of the interview. Following her undergraduate and Master's study in China, she went to a distinguished British university and joined the doctoral program in earth sciences. She was married and had a child.

The method used for data collection was semi-structured interviews, in which a set of predetermined questions were asked to start the conversation, the narration of the participants' experiences was facilitated, and topics participants saw pertinent were elaborated on and discussed. Participants were invited to provide information about themselves, recount their experience with applying for and being interviewed for



academic positions, and answer following-up questions in a dialogical style with the interviewer (i.e. the researcher). (See Appendix D for a copy of the interview protocol.)

I consider semi-structured interviews to be appropriate since it allowed both the coverage of a collection of topics relevant to the research question and the unfolding of the story and in-depth conversation. Each interview lasted for approximately one to one and a half hours. Face-to-face conversations was a preferred form of interview. Yet, in the event that participants could not be physically present, instant communication software was employed to facilitate simultaneous dialogues, hence virtual interviews. Eventually, three interviews were virtual, and one was face-to face. Transcription of the interviews afterwards and notetaking during the interviews constituted the field texts.

Recordings were made by a voice recorder and a backup recorder, both password-protected, with the consent of the participants. Due to the collaborative nature of the research (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990), the results were provided to the participants to make sure there was no misrepresentation or misunderstanding. Any questions participants had relating the procedures were discussed between the researcher and participants. Given that the thesis is written in English, the primary language used in the interviews was English, to avoid misinterpretations in translation. But it was also communicated to participants that Chinese was also allowed in circumstances the interviewees deemed necessary. In the case when Chinese was used in the interview, the translations were also sent to the participants for confirmation.

### **4.3 Data Analysis**

This research is inevitably rooted in the interpretive paradigm. A predominately thematic approach was used for data analysis with a both hermeneutic and

phenomenological leaning. As Kerby (1991) suggested in his exploration into the philosophical strands of thinking relevant to narrative inquiry, narratives need to be understood from hermeneutic perspectives with awareness of the precondition that human subjects are immediate to phenomena. Similarly, Merriam (2009) proposed that narrative data is both textual (as in the text of the story) and phenomenological (as in the story is the lived experience of a human being) (p. 32-33). Regarding the phenomenological nature of narratives, the analysis of the data is conducted with a conscious awareness of the fact that participants exercised their intentionality while recollecting their experience, and that personal perspectives are always limited and sometimes reshaped, reconstructed, or even reinvented. In accordance with the textual nature of narrative data, the analysis is largely informed by hermeneutic philosophy that highlights the interpretation of the text and the “author’s” intention in connection with context (Merriam, 2009, p. 32-33), as well as the guiding hermeneutic idea that all knowledge is situated and “cannot escape from the historicity and locatedness of our gaze” (Kerby, 1991, p. 10).

Fraser and Jarldorn (2015) identified three models of narrative analysis: “1) thematic analysis, which emphasizes what is said; 2) structural analysis, which emphasizes how stories are told; and 3) interactional analysis” (p. 155). While acknowledging that structural and interactional analyses are valid methods, thematic analysis best served the purpose of this research. My approach to data examination, therefore, was mainly to look for patterns and reoccurring themes, but also maintain due attention about individual specificity. Though mainly focusing on incidents and realities the participants experienced, I tried to take emotions and feelings into consideration in the presentation and analyses of data. Given that the emotional and political complexities of both the

researchers and the participants can cloud their thinking (Fraser & Jarldorn, 2015), the ways the narratives were told, how participants interacted with the interviewer, the feelings and thoughts on both the participants' and the interviewer's part, and details exceeding the textual realm of data, such as obvious changes in tones are taken into account when conducting analyses and discussions.

Based on the nature of my study, I conducted an analysis of both the recording and the interview transcripts focusing on the plots and themes of the stories, while giving reasonable attention to the interviewees' tones and emotions. Undertaking a thematic analysis, I tried to glean from the participants' recounting of their experience insights about gender equality in higher education in China, how their experienced lives constituted and shaped their sense of self, and meanings they make from the realities as they experience such. During the data analysis stage, I rely on self-reflexivity and repeated examination of data to avoid distortion of the participants' unique perspectives and ways of sense-making. It is also my goal to take the temporal, locational, cultural, and societal factors of the narratives into consideration, and in this way better situate the insights generated from the participants' narrative in the context that is contemporary, local, and global.

#### **4.4 Ethical Implications**

Since this research involve human participants, approval from Western University Research Ethics Board was obtained before data collection began. (See Appendix E for the Ethics Board Approval Letter.) The conduct of the research was full compliance with Western's ethics requirements. Participants joined the research voluntarily and were allowed to withdraw at any time of the study. All information gathered during the study

remained confidential and was used only for the purpose of research. Both the voice recording and the transcripts were stored in two password-protected external storage drives to ensure the security of the information

The purpose of the research, measures to protect confidentiality, procedures to conduct the interviews, data collection (recording and transcription), and how collected information was used and stored were communicated to potential participants via email to ensure that each participant fully understood the research and what to expect along the process. Based on the types of information research participants provided, consent forms containing the information were signed before the research started to make sure that participants were duly informed. Contact information of the researcher was provided to each participant so that participants were able to reach the researcher at any point of the research.

Narrative inquiry in its core is a collaborative endeavour (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Relationships among researchers and participants in this study are worth special attention. I have elaborated on the participants previously in this chapter and discussed self-positioning in the introduction chapter. Here I reiterate how the positionalities of the participants and the researcher interact. As a Chinese woman who has finished her undergraduate study in Beijing and worked there for over six years, I spent my life in China before coming to Canada to pursue a Master's program in education. I am familiar with the various forms of oppression and constraints on women in Chinese society, especially in academia and workplaces. Conducting this research, I think of myself as sharing the cultural-social context with the participants and a certain amount of background knowledge to understand them. Throughout the research, I tried to create a

reciprocal and amicable relationship with my participants and an empowering safe space for telling individual life stories and for female academics to stand in solidarity.

## **4.5 Trustworthiness**

One of the questions often directed to narrative research, as to other qualitative approaches, is the one of validity and generalizability. Since, compared with quantitative methods dealing with statistics and general rules and overall trends, individual experiences can seem too personal, too particular, and even opinionated. In addition, since narratives are not mere facts but instead always reconstructed and refigured with the revolving of time and the development of the narrators' personal experience they could be ever changing. Nevertheless, the essential idea of narrative inquiries, and of this study, lies in exploring the personal and the particular and refusion to generalize social justice, social relations and female subjectivity into figures. Regarding the relation between the temporal and the historical, the personal and the social, and the part and the whole, narratives are conceptualized as "temporally continuous and socially interactive" (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Olson, 1995). The existing body of literature calls researchers to pay special attention to the temporal and contextual quality of personal experiences and situate the interpretations accordingly (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Conle, 2000; Kerby, 1991).

In Kerby's (1991) words, "there can be no such thing as a final truth" (p. 14), and narrative is more concerned about "a certain adequacy to an implicit meaning" than "a historically correct representation" (p. 7). Connelly and Clandinin (1990) suggested that rather than embracing positivism, we develop criteria that are more apt to evaluate narrative inquiries. Such evaluations they proposed include apparency, verisimilitude,

transferability, adequacy, and plausibility (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 7-8). By such criteria, Connelly and Clandinin (1990) advocate viewing narratives as an experiential whole that is to be interpreted not as a causal chain of events, but dialectical, explanatory and invitational narratives that touch people with its particularity and allow reinterpretation. Such propositions are echoed by Conle (2000), who stood by tentative and dialectical narrative methods that can evoke “resonance” (p. 53).

Bearing in mind the above discussions around what constitute good narrative research, I took the cultural contextuality and temporal fluidity of personal experiences as significant research considerations and mapped out my study to be tentative, open-ended, and dialectical. As I have discussed in the chapter of theoretical considerations about objectivity, situated knowledge, and the community as the entity of knowledge rather than individuals, narrative inquiry is also closely interwoven with feminist theory in considering the participants as those who know the society they are imbedded in and as makers of their own story and identities. Furthermore, my interpretation will inevitably bare my own attitude and worldview, which is in turn informed by my situated and embodied experience and beliefs. In this sense, by doing, thinking and writing up this research, I am attempting to answer the call standpoint feminism made to produce understandings and interpretations from my viewpoint. Last but not least, to achieve a better balance between scholarship and artistry and to give due diligence to overall soundness of the research, I also employed the criteria and suggested techniques about qualitative research developed by Whittemore, Chase, and Mandle (2001) to assess and adapt my research design, practice and presentation strategies when necessary.

In the next chapter, I present my research findings in the form of individual narratives so as to maintain the richness of the participants' lived experiences.

## Chapter 5

### 5 Findings

This chapter comprises research findings based on the conversations the researcher had with four Chinese females who had their formative, i.e. primary and secondary, education in China; had received (or were receiving) their tertiary education in an English-speaking Western country; and had experience with being interviewed for an academic position in China in the last ten years. The semi-structured interviews were designed to explore how gender and international education background shaped the experiences of Chinese females educated abroad in their efforts to find an academic position in China. I am concerned about the experiences internationally educated Chinese women had when trying to obtain academic positions in China. I wanted to find out what obstacles and gender-specific challenges, if any, these female scholars faced in the job-hunting process and how they overcame the barriers. I further explore what it was like to be high-achieving women in academia, how they felt about their experiences with job-seeking, and the ways in which education abroad might have informed their gender awareness.

In this chapter, I present the collected data in the form of four individual narratives to be consistent with the narrative approach and standpoint theory that informed this study and to capture the storied nature of their lived experiences. The four stories are arranged in an alphabetical order based on the aliases of the participants. All participants are conferred with about their preferred coded names. Some chose their aliases by themselves, while some asked the researcher to decide on their aliases. Each narrative starts with an introduction to the participants, in that the protagonists are considered part



of the findings that reveal those that sought academic positions in China and what motivated them. Subsequently, the processes each narrator went through in seeking academic positions are recounted in chronological order, including the initial stages, job applications, and a detailed description of job interviews. Following this, reflective thoughts shared by the narrators are presented. The third-person voice was adopted to avoid confusion and for the readers' convenience. Verbatim quotations excerpted directly from the participants' speech are put in quotation marks.

## **5.1 Shiwei: Reverse Culture shock**

Shiwei has been working for over two years as a faculty member at a transnational research university in one of the largest cities in China. She did her undergraduate study in a top Chinese university and then lived in the United States for seven years; six of which were for her Ph.D. in philosophy. Toward the end of her Ph.D. program at a world-renowned university, she was aware that “the job market was terrible, and it was hard to get a job almost anywhere”, academic jobs especially so. But after careful consideration, she chose to pursue an academic career where she could continue with research and educating people, which she considered “more meaningful than working in the profit-driven private sectors”. She received offers from both a European institution for a postdoctoral program and a university in China for a faculty position. She decided to defer her faculty job and worked in Europe for one year as a postdoctoral fellow before starting her career as a professor in her current institution.

Shiwei started to apply for academic positions in a wide range of regions including the United States, Canada, China, and European countries during her last year in the Ph.D. program. She diversified her destinations and applied for as many positions as she

could to increase her opportunities for success. For jobs in China, she experienced hardship gathering hiring information from the start. She tried to make contacts with a few Chinese universities through the contact information they posted on their official websites, yet none of them ever replied, leaving her wondering if the contact information was valid. Shiwei ended up relying primarily on people she knew in her field who worked at Chinese universities to introduce her to faculty heads and to forward her application documents since that was the only effective way to get responses. In her experience, institutions had clear requirements on educational background for candidates. Academic excellence was preferred but there were no specific criteria regarding this. Shiwei prepared multiple writing samples to submit together with her CV as evidence of her academic ability.

She got several interviews from the United States, China, and Europe, among which she has seen contrasts and similarities. Before her interviews, Shiwei went on the universities' websites to read about the research areas of the faculty members to be better prepared for the questions that might be raised during the interview. She noticed that "some Chinese universities do not update their official websites", so the information available online was often dated and less helpful. For Chinese institutions where she had personal connections, Shiwei sometimes received "insider knowledge concerning certain professors who were likely to be aggressive or arrogant" as a heads-up for the question and answer section of her interview.

Shiwei's life and work experiences in North America, Europe, and China honed her aptness to detect cultural differences in job application and working environments, especially the discrepancies between Chinese and North American contexts. Interviews in

China, she reported, sometimes gave her reverse culture shock. Interviews with Chinese institutions seemed to be more contingent upon situations and convenience. In principle, there were two to three rounds of interviews. The first round often took the form of a virtual interview, in which questions about the candidate's education and research were asked. She found virtual interviews more unpredictable largely owing to potential technical problems. One time, the interviewers could see her, but she could not see them. She felt exposed and more stressed not being able to see while being projected to a meeting room screen and scrutinized. Another time, as it happened, neither Shiwei nor the interviewing committee was able to get images and the interview turned into an audio meeting. Shiwei felt she was able to conceal her nervousness in this way and deal with the interview better: "you could hide your psychology when they couldn't see you. I was nervous, but my voice was very calm".

The second round usually constituted a visit to campus to present an academic lecture in the style of teaching, but there were constant changes. In face-to-face communications with Chinese universities, Shiwei confessed that she was often surprised when she was asked "questions that are considered personal or sensitive in the North American context". For one interview, she visited the campus without having had a virtual meeting beforehand. A faculty member contacted her and informed her of the date and content of the visit. On this visit, Shiwei gave an academic presentation on one of her previous research papers. The presentation took place in a large meeting room where she stood in front of an audience of around 30 people including members of the hiring faculty, senior administrative staff, people from other faculties, and a few graduate

students. Most of the audience were men. As Shiwei commented, philosophy is “a male-dominant field” both in the west and the east, and in China particularly so.

Interestingly, she was in this interview together with a male candidate who was her competition, and the two of them were in each other’s audience when they presented respectively. At the end of Shiwei’s 50-minute presentation, there was a question-and-answer session in which academic questions were raised. Shiwei sensed that “there was some tension among two members of the [hiring] faculty”, who disagreed with each other on fundamental topics “such as what philosophy is”. Regardless, questions raised were all academic and relevant to her research topic. No one asked her any personal questions regarding her age or marriage at this point.

After the presentation, Shiwei and the male candidate were invited to have dinner with representatives from the university, mainly executives and faculty members. The dinner was amicable and folksy, “like an ordinary Chinese business dinner”, as Shiwei recalled. In the casual exchange of conversations, the department chair asked Shiwei, “May I know how old you are? Are you married? Do you have kids?” At that time, Shiwei was married without children. She interpreted such personal questions as the result of cultural differences between China and North America and decided to answer truthfully albeit a feeling of discomfort. She reflected that such questions would be inappropriate to be raised by employers in North America.

Shiwei did not ever hear back from this institution. She later learned from a personal connection she had in this institution that the job was offered to the male candidate she met at the campus visit. Shiwei’s connection in this institution who was a faculty member told her that:

at a closed-door meeting where the faculty members talked about the two job candidates, they did bring up the fact that I am a woman, yet I didn't have a kid as something against me. I think that is something they didn't want because according to their past experience, after female faculty members get married and have kids, they often spend more time and energy just taking care of their family, their kids.

Shiwei contemplated that it was hard for candidates to put their fingers on institution's considerations about female candidates' potential family responsibilities as a negative factor in that the concerns were oftentimes covert. She would not be able to know that a seemingly banal dinnertime chat could be used for gathering information that would later be part of candidate evaluation were it not for her personal connection with a faculty member who had access to the internal meeting. She explained:

I did not think much about it at the time they asked me such questions. But when I learned that they used it as something against me, I felt angry and disappointed because this is a prestigious university in China. You would assume that they maintain some integrity and academic support for women. If a reputable institution like this even doesn't hold up to these ideals, then what about other universities who are less looked up to? I think I was also disappointed partly because of cultural differences.

Shiwei presented her academic work to a group of faculty members at a visit to another campus. She was visiting her family in China during holidays at that time and was approached by the institution she applied to. A meeting was soon scheduled, leaving her little time to prepare. Akin to the aforementioned situation, she did a presentation in a meeting room and took questions, which were essentially academic. The attending

faculty was male-dominant, as was expected. The main difference was that the audience was smaller – all from a specific subfield in the department. A question was raised by an interviewer who had heard about Shiwei's interview with another institution and wondered which job she would accept if she was offered both jobs. The question took Shiwei by surprise since it would unlikely to be raised in interviews in western contexts. Following the campus visit, she was told that a virtual meeting was needed, seemingly to make up the missing first-round interview. She then met with the university's hiring committee through Skype and discussed her education, research, and work experiences with them. After this, no clear feedback nor written notifications were given to Shiwei. Later on, when Shiwei had taken the offer from elsewhere, she was asked by people from this university whether she would be interested in applying for another position. She saw this as a subtle way to decline her previous application.

Shiwei sensed the implications of languages in the interviews and interactions with institutional representatives. During both of her interviews, Shiwei found it sometimes difficult and effort-consuming to translate the terminologies she used in her academic work from English to Chinese. Shiwei often had to “invent” new words in Chinese since there was, most of the time, no corresponding expressions in Chinese for philosophical terms. But she was confident that “younger generations of philosophers read more in English nowadays”. For interpersonal interactions, she remembered a campus visit where her liaison was a female scholar from another faculty. Instead of talking about their research, the faculty member ardently shared with Shiwei housing information in Chinese. Shiwei appreciated the affinity brought by the commonality of language they shared and thought that the faculty member “probably would not be talking about this to

foreign scholars”. Likewise, Shiwei thought certain personal questions would not be asked if they had used English to converse.

Since most universities Shiwei interviewed with did not provide any clear feedback, some remained silent and some conveyed the decision subtly and verbally, she felt that there was a lack of transparency and a great uncertainty in the decision-making process of universities’ hiring processes. “None of the institutions would tell you clearly what their evaluation was like,” Shiwei commented. Her expectations about her job hunting in China were fairly positive when she graduated from the world's top-ranking universities with excellent academic achievements in philosophy. Having experienced the job application process as she did, she started to contemplate that it was not as straightforward as she hoped: "There are many more factors to that. And life is far more complex.”

Fortunately, Shiwei was not under severe pressure throughout the job-hunting process. She thought “there are so many universities in China. If I did not get into the very top ones, I could join a less prominent one.” She jokingly added that “even if I couldn’t find a job at all, I could just be a housewife. So what?” In short, applying for a number of jobs and multiplying her career options helped mitigate pressure in the potentially stressful process.

Shiwei eventually got her faculty position at a research university that is a collaboration between Chinese and western higher education institutions and has a highly diversified faculty body and students from various regions in the world. As Shiwei put it, this institution was “more aware of equality and creating a diverse educational environment. They've been trying to hire more females in philosophy since they saw

there are fewer female faculty members. At the last stage, I was competing with three other male candidates. I think they considered me being a woman, a Chinese, and the qualifications I had and thought that I fit my position well.” In this institution, Shiwei is on a tenure track. She has to work hard and publish more academic papers in order to secure tenure. But “unlike other traditional Chinese universities that would tell you the number of publications you need and the journals you publish on should be included by certain databases, my university just said that they want us to improve our publications without very specific requests.”

The application and interview processes Shiwei experienced with this university resembled those with North American institutions. According to Shiwei, interviews at North American universities share more or less similar structures and procedures: a preliminary meeting followed by a job talk on campus, individual exchanges with faculty members, and a working dinner after the job talk. Candidates are likely to be given clear schedules and allowed sufficient time to prepare. Shiwei described such long job talks that often lasted a whole day or two days as a “marathon”. During Shiwei’s final years as a Ph.D. candidate, her department “hired a trainer who’s a female to help Ph.D. students with future job applications and job talks”. She had a few sessions with this trainer, which she believed substantially improved her skills with academic presentations and interpersonal interactions with the employers, “mentally and physically” prepared her for the marathons of interviews, and enhanced her confidence in doing interviews, both in Chinese and in western contexts.

Now a faculty member, Shiwei has been attending multiple academic events in various Chinese universities. She constantly "noticed that female faculty members and



also female graduate students tend to serve other people, like pouring water for them, and those who were served just take it for granted". Shiwei criticized the lack of gender awareness of those who are served and also lamented that "it has become a cultural thing. People expect women to do those things and they act as if they naturally tend to serve too much." She further reflected that junior faculty members are expected to do more administrative work, Shiwei candidly shared her insights:

It is universal that when you become a professor your job is not just about research and publications. You are supposed to do administrative works such as supervising students, mentoring an undergraduate class, organizing some events the department is having, etc. No matter where you work, China or abroad, administrative tasks are part of your job. But I think in China, people generally expect junior faculty members to do a lot of administrative work and service. My current position is like this as well. But in North America, it is often supposed that senior people should take up more responsibilities. Because junior people suffer from more pressure being on the tenure track. So, the idea is that senior people who have already got tenure should do more such work and service.

Shiwei held firmly, based on her experience and observation in Chinese academia, that Chinese higher education institutions are not doing enough to promote gender equality, and numerous things need to be changed.

Chinese university should be more aware of gender issues, give more opportunities to women, and support female scholars because it not only adds diversity to the institution, but also influences how the students view the field and their future career. If you have a half-female student body, but 90% male professors, even the

excellent female students are going to think to themselves that “it is going to be so difficult for me to become a scholar. I shall just give it up”. This is bad for education.

Building on her argument about the problematic episodes she detected in the workplace such as junior females waiting on seniors and males, Shiwei called for males to show respect to women and bear gender equality in mind in “mundane daily interactions”. Further, she appealed to every member of academia and the professional realm to take actions and call off things that are inappropriate from happening. “If someone just stops it, it would change the dynamic so much by such simple actions.”

Shiwei not only learned more about gender during her study in western countries, but also perceived gaps in the understanding of gender between her peers and herself. She said that:

when I first went to the U.S., I had very few concepts about gender inequality and sexism. But since gender issues are frequently discussed in philosophy, that definitely influenced how I view those issues. When I came back to China, I also realize that my friends and people in my generation don't actually think about those problems. They either don't think that there are problems at all, or acknowledge the problems while being quite neutral about those problems. So, I do believe our educational background influence how we think about these things.

Regarding how she navigates gender barriers confronting women in higher education, Shiwei articulated her belief as “bite the bullet and strive for academic excellence” and the need to have a sense of solidarity with other female scholars. In the face of discrimination and setbacks, we, as women and young professionals who are

starting our careers, should be tough and steady and remain outstanding. It is also her conviction that female scholars should support one another and take responsibility and courage to call off unfairness to help alleviate injustice in her environment. “When we teach, we should be unbiased towards our students. We should be able to set up good examples to our students that women can be great researchers.” Such a sense of responsibility and unity has inspired Shiwei to constantly be “better and stronger” both as an individual and as a way to commit to the collective good and strive for alliance and support among all women.

## **5.2 Wenqi: Two stories**

Wenqi is a Ph.D. student in education who has been living in North America for more than nine years. She finished her undergraduate program in China, a Master’s in the U.S., another Master’s in Canada, where she then continued to work on her Ph.D. program. Out of her passion for academic research, Wenqi expected an academic position to be a good choice for her after graduation. She mainly looked for academic jobs in China for two reasons: the difficulties of finding such jobs in western countries and the need to be able to take care of her aging parents. “I wanted to be closer to my parents because I am the only child in my family.” She started applying for academic jobs in October 2018, when she was close to finishing her Ph.D. study.

Through the process of applying for academic jobs in China, Wenqi found it hard to access recruitment information. She had to go to individual universities’ official websites to look for job openings. Sometimes they requested applicants to complete applications by filling forms and/or uploading documents through portals on those websites, sometimes by contacting the contact information given in the recruitment post,

sometimes both ways. The forms provided by the online portals, according to Wenqi, differed based on institutions. Usually, they required education background, academic achievements, previous work experiences, personal information such as candidates' age, gender, marital status, and sometimes information about their children.

According to Wenqi, the required qualifications for academic positions that were clearly stated by the institutions she applied for, in general, were similar: having a Ph.D. degree or almost finishing a Ph.D. program. Besides the degree, the universities she applied for did not specify other preferences. But Wenqi was aware that publication was crucial. She assumed that the institutions would "go through the candidates' CVs and compare the numbers of publications". Those with more prestigious journal publications would be considered as worthy candidates. Wenqi had then come to the understanding that trying to publish more articles is one of the most effective ways to become more competitive in vying for an academic position in China, and one that was "not gender-related", meaning that it was fair competition among all candidates.

Wenqi's experiences indicated that age and international background were important factors universities considered in hiring processes. Generally, both female and male candidates applying for assistant professor and postdoctoral positions had to be under the age of 35. However, some universities loosened the age limit for women to 40. The reason was that there were corresponding age stipulations for scholars who apply for national research funding. Since obtaining national funding was a major objective for university professors, the universities set age limits accordingly. Wenqi emphasized that age limits were only applicable to Chinese citizens. International education background was preferred: "it is an unwritten rule that they prefer someone who has more

international experience. Like, doing a Ph.D. in the states, Canada, or European countries, or at least has one to two years working on exchange programs or as visiting scholars.”

By the time of the interview for this study (October 2019), Wenqi had sent her resumes to several universities in China, among which four institutions had responded, one hiring an assistant professor and three with post-doctoral positions open. Two of her interview experiences impressed her most owing to their remarkable distinctions. She categorized the two types of interviews based on the prominence and locations of the universities, since she presumed characteristics of the institutions contributed largely to the distinctions between those experiences: the more esteemed the university was, and the better its geographical location was, the more competitive it became to apply for an academic job there. Consequently, the university made less effort to improve the experiences for the job candidates. For less distinguished universities, they cared enough to create a friendlier and enjoyable environment for potential job applicants. She told two stories about two contrasting experiences in her academic job application process.

The first story was about Wenqi’s interview with a university in a large city that was hiring an assistant professor. She applied for this position through the online portal on the university’s website. Besides the regular application documents, information required included not only personal information such as age and gender, but also family information such as marital status, parents' and spouse's occupations, and even children's ages. After that, when Wenqi was visiting her family in China, a staff member from this institution contacted her. They decided on the date of the interview, and the staff told Wenqi that she would be interviewed in the afternoon.

Wenqi took the interview seriously and tried to be accommodating by getting her presentation ready as soon as she could. She also looked into the profiles of the faculty online before going to the interview, attempting to find out their academic interests as a way to expect the questions they were likely to ask. Besides, she paid special attention to the numbers of full professors and associate professors in the faculty body to get an idea about the possibilities for promotion if she joined this institution. On the day of the interview, she dressed up in a suit and high-heeled shoes, skipped lunch to avoid traffic, and arrived at the university early. She waited in a meeting room with other candidates. Before long she realized that although everyone arrived around the same time, she was the last one to be interviewed. The perk of being the last was that each candidate who had finished their interview and returned to the waiting room kindly shared with Wenqi what it was like during the interview, helping her to be better prepared.

After five hours of waiting, Wenqi was finally interviewed in a round-table meeting room. Standing in front of professors, senior administrative members, and a video camera overlooking everything happening in this room, she presented her academic work and answered questions from the interviewers. All questions were related to her research area and personal questions were not asked. Wenqi explained that the interview was very structured partly by reason of a tight schedule and partly because “they wouldn’t say anything so obvious in front of the camera”. Moreover, detailed personal information had already been collected online before the interview.

During the interview, Wenqi noticed the young lady, a junior staff member who contacted her and arranged her interview, was also in the room. She was present but not attending the interview as she was only there to serve tea to the interviewers. Wenqi was

not offered tea, nor was she asked to take a seat the whole time. She felt tired and slightly awkward. She realized, in hindsight, that she related herself to the young woman. This seemingly commonplace action, younger woman serving tea to others, reminded Wenqi of the dynamics in Chinese academia and probably all workplaces in China that if she was to be recruited by an institution, it is very likely that she herself, being the junior female member, would be performing the role of the tea-serving lady and take up administrative tasks and other chores of the sort.

Finally, the interview wrapped up with one interviewer concisely saying “thank you for coming”. Wenqi asked the person who contacted her if and when she would be getting feedback and was told to wait for follow-up contact. Yet she did not hear from the university for a very long time, so she thought she did not get the job and extended the time of her Ph.D. study. However, six months after the interview, the university reached out to Wenqi and invited her to the second round of interview. “The winning candidate would start working within two weeks,” they told Wenqi. At that point, unfortunately, it would have been impossible for her to take up the position at such short notice since she had already decided to take another year to work on her Ph.D. and build her academic CV through further publications.

Wenqi was upset about the lack of efficiency and communication on the university's part. She further recognized this matter as evidence of the lack of format and standardized procedures in the decision-making of universities' hiring practices, which aggravated uncertainty in the process of recruitment. Adding to this point, she recalled that she had a friend who had already gotten an offer to an academic position but was told that he was unqualified at the last minute “just because the university [where] he did his

undergraduate degree was not one of the top-ranked. You never know what is going to happen. Even at the very last stage, there can be changes.”

Another story consisted of Wenqi’s interview with a university in a smaller city in southern China. The university was launching a Young Scholars Forum at the time. Wenqi applied online and was soon approached by a female faculty member who expressed their interest in Wenqi’s research. The female faculty member, an associate professor, invited Wenqi to go to the university to present her research and discuss the possibility for her to join their postdoctoral program and agreed to pay for her plane tickets and accommodation. Wenqi agreed with delight and planned her trip efficiently. Two weeks later she was on the flight to China. Her liaison had already booked the hotel and zealously proposed to pick up Wenqi at the airport. She felt welcomed and relaxed.

When Wenqi arrived, six faculty members engagingly attended her one-hour-long presentation. Some of the attendees were from adjacent academic areas and asked interdisciplinary questions. After the exchange of academic conversations, the faculty members casually asked Wenqi about her household registration<sup>1</sup>, marital status, and whether or not she had children. Knowing too well that the concerns of women having babies are common and unavoidable in the Chinese context, Wenqi decided to take initiative. She persuasively stated that she had no plan for children: “I’ve been married for six years and spent years in Canada. I would have already had one if I ever wanted a

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<sup>1</sup>Household registration, also known as hukou in Chinese, is a system used in mainland China registering an individual as a resident of a specific area, usually where they are born or where their fathers' residence is.



child”. She trusted that by convincing them that there was no risk of her taking maternity leave, she turned a potential disadvantage into an advantage in competing for the job.

To Wenqi’s surprise, after her clarification that she did not plan to have children, the faculty members told her not to worry, that the university would help get the employees’ children into good kindergartens and schools affiliated to the university, and that they would pay decent salary so that their employees would be able to afford babysitters. Wenqi explained that not all questions concerning marriage and babies directed at job candidates were to be used as negative evaluations. Under the circumstances where institutions wanted to attract job candidates, universities would bring up the topic of children in order to inform candidates of the benefits they offer regarding childcare and education of employees' children.

The hospitality and friendly atmosphere extended to the dinner party for visitors like Wenqi and representatives from the university, and to the various academic events and recreational activities planned by the university. On the next day, the president of the university, communist party secretary, other senior executives of the university, and local provincial officials held a meeting to receive the visitors and explained in length the benefits the employees of the university would enjoy and the provincial government’s devotion to the development of education and financial support to the academic projects in that university.

Wenqi’s two-day visit to this institution was nothing but enjoyable. She built rapport with some faculty members, with whom she remained in touch with, exchanging academic ideas and resources every now and then. In their correspondence, the faculty members occasionally encouraged Wenqi to consider joining their institution when she

graduates. Wenqi is still mulling over accepting this offer since it is in a city relatively far away from her hometown, which would defeat her purpose to be close to her parents. It is also in a region economically less developed than her hometown. These hesitations notwithstanding, she knows she would be welcomed in this institution.

The most directly felt obstacles in finding academic jobs in China for Wenqi were language and geographical distance. She had most of her interviews in Chinese. Like Shiwei, she recounted that by virtue of her academic training in English, it could be difficult for her to translate some of the academic lingo efficiently and precisely into Chinese. At one interview, some of the audience was from a related area but not exactly the same as hers. She and the audience struggled to understand each other for the question-and-answer session. Another barrier Wenqi identified was distance. Institutions she experienced often notified her about the interview schedule two weeks in advance. If it was supposed to be a face-to-face interview, it would be difficult to plan her trips and prepare for the interview in such a short notice given that she was still studying in Canada.

Wenqi pointed out how Chinese higher education institutions claim to be holding up to gender equality while not working towards gender equality in their daily practices. Wenqi found it hard to change the status quo in view of the inconsistency in institutions' words and deeds: "Chinese university talk about gender equality in the same way some western universities cling to political correctness." She remarked that all institutions would definitely say that they do not discriminate against women, but underneath the surface, there would be some covert forms of gender-based discrimination. At times the inequalities were so intangible it left Wenqi with a feeling of powerlessness. On the other

hand, Wenqi believed that she could sometimes transform her disadvantages into advantages, such as by convincing her employer that she did not plan to have children.

In retrospect to how education experiences abroad had influenced the way she understood gender, Wenqi said that her years in the U.S. did not have much of an influence. Since it was not part of her academic program, gender remained an unfamiliar concept to her. When she came to study in Canada however, she took a course on gender as part of her study. This course had informed her on issues and academic conversations around gender, and made her more capable of thinking from the perspective of gender equality and everyday sexism.

### **5.3 Xiayue: A Good Match**

Xiayue worked in a college as an English language teacher in China for eight years before immigrating to Canada with her family in 2012. Since then, she has obtained her Master's and Ph.D. degrees in education in Canada. Xiayue deemed it natural for her to choose an academic career due to the influence of her father, who is a college professor in China, and on the grounds that she took great interest in the academic realm. She only looked for jobs in China considering her wish to be with her husband who works in mainland China and the lack of job opportunities for her as a Chinese-Canadian in Canada. She started applying for academic positions at the beginning of her third year, expecting to be able to graduate after four years of study. Soon, one of her applications for a position in a prestigious university in China went successful. The university offered Xiayue the postdoctoral position in the program "postdoc as future faculty" almost immediately after the interview. She then finished her Ph.D. program and went back to China to embark on her career in 2018 after her six years' stay in Canada.

Xiayue claimed that at the start, she attempted to use search engines to locate universities that were hiring but found that process inefficient. She then changed strategies and looked for job opening information on individual universities' official websites and through personal connections. She sent out multiple applications during the start of the third year in her Ph.D. program. The information she had to disclose when applying for academic jobs usually included name, age, CV, and occasionally a photo of herself. She envisaged that people could oftentimes tell the gender of a person based on their names for the sake of the characteristics of Chinese names. If a name is not gender-specific, then the photo of candidates would have certainly helped to inform the employers of the applicant's gender.

Xiayue maintained that age is an important threshold for female academic job candidates. "It is a common sense that we know in China, for any positions in the government or in universities, most often, the beginning age of the girls could not be over 35 years old." Some of the universities Xiayue applied to had replied to her application by explaining that for a lecturer's position, the female candidates should not be older than 35 to be considered eligible, while for the position of associate professor, they accept female candidates up to the age of 40. According to Xiayue, candidates who held citizenship of other countries were categorized as "Waiguo Zhuanjia" (foreign experts) and therefore not limited by their age.

For female candidates, Xiayue stated, marriage and having children were essential in most universities' hiring evaluations as a result of concerns around maternity leaves. From the universities' point of view, such a possibility would interrupt women's

professional life. But institutions would not explicitly express their concerns as such, neither did they loosen the academic standards for females. She explained:

When institutions recruit girls, they will think about whether or not you will be pregnant and give birth to a baby. If you give birth to a baby, probably you will not concentrate on your job for at least around 6 months, or one year. So, they will think about it, but they will not say it very apparently. But for our program, even though you are pregnant – they do not encourage you to be pregnant – they will not lower the requirements for your position. For example, [...] you still need to have at least two SSCI publications in two years. That is their requirement.

Publication was a determining factor for applications to academic jobs, as far as Xiayue knew. The publication requirements for academic positions she applied for were quite clear and specific. “They told me that if you want to apply for the job as an associate professor, you need to have at least three SSCI<sup>2</sup> publications. Maybe at least two, but most of the 985 and 211 universities, they require around three SSCI journals.” As noted in the introductory chapter of this thesis, the term “985 and 211 universities” refers to top Chinese universities that receive special government funding aiming at making them world-class universities. For these top-notch institutions, academic productivity is part of their key performance index. As Xiayue disclosed, only publications that made to SSCI journals counted as valid in the eyes of such institutions. When Xiayue was studying in Canada, no one talked about the idea that one has to have a

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<sup>2</sup> The Social Sciences Citation Index (SSCI) is a citation index that covers over 3,000 academic journals across more than 50 disciplines in the social sciences. Journals indexed by SSCI are described as the world's leading journals.

certain number of SSCI publications to prepare for one's future academic jobs. She was then offered the postdoctoral position so that she could work on getting more SSCI publications.

In Xiayue's experience, institutions hiring for academic positions were very particular about the candidates' field of research, teaching experience, and educational background. Some of her applications did not work out for the reason that, she speculated, she was not the "best match" for all the specifications. For instance, she applied for a teaching position at one of the most esteemed universities, and later learned they hired another candidate as the department was in urgent need of someone who could teach a specific course and the successful candidate had taught the course before. Occasions like this convinced Xiayue that finding an academic position in China is about finding a "good match" between your qualifications and the demands of the institutions. "You need to find a match between your work experience, your learning past, what you specialize in, as well as, sometimes, whether or not you're interested in the job. Sometimes, it's very hard to find a match between so many things together."

Xiayue disclosed that in her field, those who went to graduate school abroad were considered more competent. Universities, she explained, "really like to recruit people [graduated] from the States. Because educational qualifications from the United States are highly valued in China. And they also [consider] university rankings. Now I think they welcome graduates from the world's 100 top universities." In addition to overseas education, Xiayue indicated that the university she interviewed for preferred candidates with both international background and "sufficient knowledge about Chinese context and policies". Xiayue understood this is for the reason that the academic interests of the

future professors to be compatible with the local background and to be up to date with the current situations in China is deemed important.

Xiayue's successful interview experience was for a postdoctoral position at one of the top universities in her field in China. Between the options of a virtual interview and a face-to-face interview, Xiayue decided that a meeting "on-site" would work better since this institution is very close to her hometown. She took the opportunity when she was visiting her family in China and made the appointment for her interview with the institution. She did not do any particular research about the university per se before the interview since this institution is very well-known. In addition, she had been on the university campus several times previously and had personal associations with several professors who worked in the university. Xiayue had taken up responsibilities regarding human resources in her previous job, which familiarized her with the hiring procedures of universities.

As was required, Xiayue filled out some application forms and prepared a 20-minute presentation with slides that summarized her research, publication, and academic interests. The interview was scheduled at 14:30. In the waiting area, Xiayue spotted about six other candidates. When she entered the big meeting room to be interviewed, 10 interviewers were sitting in a line at one side of the large table, while Xiayue stood on the other side facing the hiring committee. The interviewers did not introduce themselves. At the time, Xiayue had no idea who they were. She later learned that they were all full professors, as only full professors were considered qualified to judge the candidates. There are typically more female students and scholars in education, but the majority of the interviewers she saw were men.

Following Xiayue's presentation, the hiring committee asked questions concerning her research and publications, and especially her understanding of the Chinese context. The interviewers took random turns, each raising one question, but one person was obviously in a higher position given that he asked three questions. As Xiayue recalled, all questions were academic-related, and directed to examine her knowledge. She stressed that the interviewers brought up many questions concerning the connections between her research area and the Chinese context. The day was tightly scheduled. When Xiayue's time was up they brought in the next candidate. The institution was highly efficient, as they informed Xiayue at 15:30 that same day that she was offered the postdoctoral position. Xiayue concluded that this interview was successful due to the fact that her qualifications were in demand by the institution. "It was just a good match", she explained.

Working in her postdoctoral program at present, Xiayue mainly focused on getting enough SSCI publications to be considered eligible to be promoted as a professor. As a matter of fact, the number of SSCI publications would determine her career trajectory in academia throughout. Toward the end of her postdoctoral program, Xiayue would be reevaluated and given an academic position in line with her number of SSCI publications. She talked about the rule of academic career development in her current institution:

If I can have four SSCI publications, next year I will do another job interview, to see whether they will give me the position as... I think if I have just two SSCI publications they could only give the position as a lecturer. But now I have four, so I think most likely they would give me the position as an associate professor. But again, it is not tenure. It is kind of a tenure track. It is very similar to the professor



positions in western universities. For example, for the first eight years, you need to have lots of (SSCI) publications; you need to have national fundings, and you also need to publish more papers. Then you'd be a full professor. Otherwise, they would stop your contract. If you cannot be a full professor, after eight years they will stop your contract. So again, I think, it's kind of a contract-based position. The job requirements are very challenging.

Xiayue reiterated that she tended not to put too much pressure on herself, either regarding the job applications or her career development. In job-hunting, she considered there was not much she had in control. Her best strategy then, was to mitigate pressure by applying for multiple positions in various institutions.

I think when people look for jobs, most often people just try. For example, we cannot just say, ok I want to find jobs; I'll just go to one university. Most often, people send application letters to different universities. [...] If you could not find a job here, probably you just try job opportunities elsewhere. So, we don't think too much about it. In job application, it's just kind of the opportunity-catch thing. It's not up to you. You could not think too much about it.

Similar to her somewhat relaxed attitude toward the job interview, she was also relaxed about her career trajectory as she was confident about her publication ability and felt there are many opportunities for her future such as working at another institution in China or going back to Canada. "I'm the kind of person who do[es] not see the pressure as a very big issue. I try my best. But you know, I have a kid at home, and I also have all my family responsibilities. So, I have lots of things to think about. Pressure is always there. For example, when I study in XX University there was also pressure. But I'm not

the person who feels very scared about pressure.” She preferred to take it step by step, both attending to her academic career and her family responsibilities.

Considering gender in hiring practices in higher education, Xiayue briefly indicated that Chinese universities had a preference for male candidates based on considerations about women’s family and childcare responsibilities:

If they [universities] consider recruit[ing] two people [a female and a male] with the same qualification, probably they will prefer recruiting a man. Because men will not give birth to a baby. And another thing, men have more energy. Because in Chinese families, moms pick up the role of taking care of babies rather than men.

Nevertheless, she was of the opinion that “gender is not a very big issue in China” since she was convinced that what universities really valued were expertise, strong publication abilities, education background, and teaching and supervisory skills. If a female candidate has got impressive CV and exceptional talent, gender is not going to stop her from aspiring high in academia. Further, universities might consider female professors as possessing special strength in doing supervisory jobs since female professors are more affable than male professors. As Xiayue earnestly articulated:

Honestly, I don’t think gender is a very big issue in China. Most often people just see your publication and your expertise. Gender may be a concern just because women cannot focus [on their work] after they give birth to a baby for around six months. But for faculty positions, this is not a very big concern, because they [universities] want to have people who have the expertise in this area. So, even though she [a female candidate] will give birth to a baby, if she graduates from a very top university; she has very strong publication abilities, and she could

supervise students, that [being a woman and possibly having babies] will not be a very big problem. They [universities] want to import the talent. Talent is the most important thing they think about, rather than gender issues.

Relatedly, Xiayue was positive that since most of the faculty members in her department are women, and that there are female professors in her area, she could keep furthering her career development without facing gender-based discriminations as long as she had the right number of publications. “Maybe [for] some positions [in other walks of life], they will see gender. But for professor positions, I don’t think that they will put gender into a very strong position to decide whether or not that person is qualified enough.”

Xiayue was also under the impression that unlike other professions, the world of academia was relatively immune to gender discrimination. During the interview, when gender bias in other walks of life were mentioned, Xiayue suggested that the academe is different from other professions:

Honestly, I don’t want to offend you. Because I’m applying for a kind of professor position. So, everyone is very serious. They only care about your knowledge in this area. Because they want to have a person with strong publication abilities and very strong knowledge in some area[s]. For example, if they recruit us, we’ll supervise more students. So that’s the only... I think that is the focal point, they will be thinking about that. Other things, I think that is not the focal point. For academic positions, maybe, everything will be more serious.

Regarding how living and studying in a western country might have influenced the way she understood gender, Xiayue expressed that she felt strongly against the ways in

which gender was “purposefully put into a top concern” in Canada. She claimed that when she interacts with people, she does not see gender. Instead, she focuses on an individual person's capabilities and interests.

Sometimes we [Chinese] see it as a very normal thing. But they [Canadians]...they just try to put it into a very apparent position. They use this [gender] as a criterion to see everything...women need to be respected. But you cannot say, because you are women, I should respect you. It's just... it's just we see humans as humans. We need to respect all human beings... [When I was] staying in Canada, I heard some radio broadcast, they always discuss something about the feminism! And something like that, which sometimes made me very uncomfortable. Because it's part of life. You could not always make it at focus!

## **5.4 Zhengnan: As if You Were a Man**

Zhengnan is an associate professor at a major research university in southern China. Following her undergraduate and Master's study in China, she went to a prestigious British university and joined the doctoral program in Earth Sciences. During the last year in her Ph.D. study, Zhengnan and her husband had a child. After graduating as a Ph.D., she decided to seek an academic position that would allow her to work on the academic research she is passionate about. An academic job fits her personality, she indicated, since she has “never left campus and always stayed in academia where you can manage your own time and tasks instead of being told what to do all the time”. She then came back to a provincial capital city in China and started applying for academic jobs in that city, given that she and her husband had agreed to work and settle their family there. Since faculty positions in her field of study tended to require two to three years of work

experience, Zhengnan took a postdoctoral position in a research university. She has recently successfully obtained the position of associate professor in that same institution due to her academic excellence.

When Zhengnan began to look for job openings after she returned to the Chinese city where she and her family planned to stay, she found online that a university was hiring. She sent application documents to the email address indicated on the website. She soon got a brief acknowledgment that her email was received, but nothing further after that. Some of her other applications also received no response. She came to realize that recruitment information online was not the best way to find an academic job. A faculty member now, Zhengnan stated, based on her gained insights about the working mechanism of universities, “the emails rarely get to the people who matter in hiring” and personal connection is much more reliable looking for academic jobs in China.

The university she had studied at before is arguably the best higher education institution in the region. Zhengnan decided to apply for the postdoctoral program at this university given that a teaching position entailed work experience, which she did not have. To complete the postdoctoral fellowship application, she filled application forms requiring information about age, gender, marriage status, household registration, parents and spouse, her child(ren), in addition to information about educational background, academic achievements, and work experience. Zhengnan later commented that the online forms caused extra work for applicants. Too much information was required; all just for formality. She believed cutting the red tape and doing what universities in western countries did, asking candidates to send their CV, would make the application process much easier.

Zhengnan's experience shed light on the dialogue around the age limit. She clarified that it is stipulated by the Chinese government that postdoctoral candidates shall not be older than 35, a rule followed by most institutions in China, as noted earlier. In the department she currently works for, the maximum age to be qualified to compete for associate professor positions is 36. Such an age limit is not necessarily practiced in all other departments, probably on account of the greater importance attached to research funding in her field. For example, two of the important funding opportunities in Zhengnan's area are The National Science Fund for Distinguished Young Scholars, awarded to candidates under 45 years of age, and the Outstanding Youth Science Foundation, allowing female applicants below the age of 40 and male applicants younger than 38 years old.

Further, Zhengnan interpreted that returnees enjoyed more, or sometimes better options when they applied for academic positions in China as a result of local and national policy favoring high-quality international education experiences. Candidates who studied abroad and earned their Ph.D. from one of the world's top 100 universities could enter a special national project that aimed at brain-gain when applying for postdoctoral programs in China that grants higher salaries and higher chances to be admitted. In addition, a national "Young overseas high-level talents introduction plan" (also known as the young-1000-plan) promises subsistence allowance, substantial funding, housing subsidy, and all kinds of benefits to those who received their Ph.D. in science and engineering from international world-class universities. But Zhengnan was also of the opinion that the academic strengths of Chinese institutions were increasingly recognized, and as long as you have strong publication and research abilities, you would

be considered for academic positions. She emphasized that “academia is a place for comparatively fair competition.”

Zhengnan’s eligibility for the postdoctoral program was determined to the greatest extent by her publications, combined with the fact that the university where she did her doctoral program ranked at the very top in the world. She commented that “although there have been rising voices in recent years that scholars should not be appraised solely by their published works, the number of publications remains the touchstone to decide a scholar’s capacity and potential in Chinese academia”. Later when applying for an associate professor’s position, Zhengnan’s article that was published in a highly distinguished journal in her field contributed greatly to her winning the competition.

Zhengnan did not do extra research on the institution or the interview committee, since she has studied in her prior academic stages at that university. She enunciated that the most important factor she considered when applying for her postdoctoral position was the possibility for her to be promoted as an associate professor at the same institution. The interview process of Zhengnan’s postdoctoral position consisted of informal meetings with the supervisor, who “had overwhelming power in decision making because half of the postdocs’ funding was supported by their supervisors”. Since the supervisor was satisfied with Zhengnan’s publications and research interests, she started the postdoctoral position without a hitch.

A little over two years into the postdoctoral program, Zhengnan had already published in one of the most internationally highly-regarded journals in her field as the first and corresponding author. It was unprecedented in this institution and proved her academic capacity. When the next annual application was open for post doctors to further

their academic career professors were open, she decided to seize the chance and compete to be promoted as an associate professor. This meant the institution had to make an exception for her since she has not finished the required three years as a postdoctoral fellow.

To apply for an associate professor's position, it was requested that each candidate used the university's new online application system. Again, age, gender, marriage status, household registration, parents and spouse, and information about their child(ren) was required, as well as education background, academic achievements, work experiences, a summary of postdoctoral achievements, and teaching plans. Besides the above, Zhengnan's application entailed self-evaluation and ethical commitment. Zhennan suspected that the ethics module was added by universities as a measure of self-protection as a result of the increasing attention to sexual harassment on campus in the recent two years. But she thought the ethics module was "nothing but a mere formality" given that no one would claim themselves unethical.

Two interviews awaited Zhengnan along the path to becoming an associate professor. The first was at the department level. Zhengnan prepared a six-minute presentation on three of her major research projects, work experience, and teaching plans. In a meeting room, over 30 full professors in the department, some holding additional executive positions such as dean or department chair, asked questions and graded the performance of the candidates. Zhangnan was "too nervous to take a closer look at the judges". She knew that in her field there were much fewer female professors than male professors. Take the department she works in for example, only three full professors are female.



Shortly after the departmental interview, Zhangnan was interviewed at the university level together with candidates from four academically related departments. The format of this interview was identical to the last one: six minutes of presentation followed by two to three minutes of questions. This time, the meeting room was smaller, with a smaller group of nine interviewers made up of vice presidents, deans and communist party secretary of the four departments, and professors from other science departments to ensure fairness. Specific academic questions were asked, but the ambiance in the meeting room was not as tense as Zhangnan expected. There was a rule that one-third of the candidates would be weeded out. Zhangnan was nervous at interviews and “didn’t even recognize some of the interviewers I knew”, but she was confident and positive about her outstanding research competence and publication. On the same day of the university interview, she was informed that she got the job.

Zhangnan affirmed that the topic of having children were never brought up during her two applications. Nevertheless, she felt lucky that she had already had a child before she started her career in academia, especially considering how stressful and time-consuming this career is. She was thankful for her parents who helped with taking care of her child. “With me and my husband being very busy at work, my mum helped a lot with our kid. It would be impossible for me to do that on my own... Family support is really important considering the stage in our life that requires most hard-work is also when we have small kids who need to be taken good care of.” Besides, she sometimes had to devote time to “research and job responsibilities during weekends and vacation times”.

In addition, she and her colleagues were often asked if they wanted more children by her superior in casual conversations since the one-child policy was aborted in most parts

of China roughly around 2018. Following the question, her superior would talk about “the negativities of having a second child”, clearly hinting that having one more child would inevitably result in employees focusing less on their jobs and this is unwanted. “Once we had a meeting, and an associate professor did not attend because he took leaves to take care of his family. His wife had just given birth to a second child. Our boss was apparently upset about that and made a somewhat scolding speech about them neglecting job responsibilities caused by having a second child, which is obviously meant to be heard by those who were present at the meeting and who had not yet had second children.”

In response to the topic about the advantages and disadvantages for women to compete for an academic position in China, Zhengnan chuckled and said, “there’s no advantage”. The most prominent disadvantage, in her opinion, was that “most women would not even try to look for an academic job at the very beginning” in the face of the persistent limitations for women and the challenges of the job. When Zhengnan graduated from her master’s program in China, the dean of her department asked her what she was going to do next when they met on a casual encounter. Learning that she was going to do a Ph.D. in Britain, the dean said, “that is good for you. Our Ph.D. program doesn’t recruit women.” But the fact that women were daunted from pursuing academic careers was also true in western countries. When Zhengnan studied as a Ph.D. candidate in a top institution in Britain, “over half of my classmates were female.” Along the process, however, “many quit before graduation and many went to work in companies after graduation”. Now there are only two women, including Zhengnan, who are still working in academia. She explained that creating an academic career is difficult, and

even more so for women. "You have to be much much better than men if you want to be a female scholar. Because if they [institutions] can choose between men and women with equal competence, they would choose men."

She contended that determination and dedication were most important for her academic pursuit. "Once you had decided to stay in academia, you just go for it". She coped with the setbacks through self-improvement and hard work. A degree from a world-renowned university and phenomenal academic capacity helped her in her academic career. In addition, she was dedicated and hardworking. Zhengnan wittily said, "gender is not a problem, but letting gender be in your way of doing your job is a problem". She believed that it is an academic's obligation to fulfill her job besides fulfilling family responsibilities, and not to let family duties stand in the way of her career.

Zhengnan found it is, to some extent, understandable that institutions were sensitive about female candidates having children. One of her female colleagues, who is a preeminent scholar "in her 40s, childless, always busy, very dedicated", once recruited a female postdoctoral fellow who "went on marital leave and then maternal leave ever since she joined the program". This post-doctoral fellow "contributed little to the project but still got paid". Zhengnan remarked, "from the viewpoint of the project management, it was certainly a waste of funding and a pain. This colleague of us [the scholar who hired the postdoctoral fellow who was often on leaves] said that even herself didn't dare to have a child in so many years."

In retrospect to how education experiences overseas might have played a role in how she perceived gender, Zhengnan credited her years in Britain with setting up female role

models and encouraging her to think of herself as equals with men. One female professor in Zhengnan's program inspired her the most. Zhengnan recalled:

She is a female, a great researcher, and scholar we all looked up to. She has a busy husband who always traveled and three daughters, but she balanced between her career and family perfectly. We felt she is more admirable than a male professor who may have achieved the same as she did because she is a woman. Those shining points shine more on her. She deserves more respect.

Zhengnan remembered that she was surrounded by "strong female figures" who impressed and influenced her:

When I was in my doctoral program, we had a post-doc who was a woman. She kept coming to work every day even until the very late stage of her pregnancy. Not just that, she did everything by herself, including once moving some heavy stuff. We offered to help but she rejected. Then I saw her on the staircase. Since the shape of her body did not allow her to carry things at the front, she balanced a heavy box on top of her head! Our office was on the fifth floor and later I saw her finally walked down to the ground floor.

It was also Zhengnan's conviction that in her field of study, gender was not a conspicuous issue and women needed to consider themselves as both intelligently and physically as capable as men. She illustrated her point with an anecdote in her area that often requires fieldwork in harsh environments:

When we do fieldwork, women work as hard as if they were men, and men work as hard as if they were slaves. Although you are a woman, you do not take yourself as a

woman. You should think that you're not different from men and that you [men and women] are all just scientific researchers.

Zhengnan made the point that some institutions in China were at times sensitive about gender. She had witnessed an interview for a lecturer in which a pregnant woman was one of the four candidates. "It was obvious that the pregnant lady was a much weaker candidate compared with others. I think there might have been a required ratio of female candidates for the interview. All the other three candidates were men. Although the lady did not get the offer since she was clearly weaker, they [the university] still included her in the interview. Maybe they thought having a female candidate is more politically correct, like in western countries." Zhengnan mentioned another academic competition for an award in which a female scholar participated in and won allegedly because she was a female and filled the quota. Zhengnan thought, when institutions have reasons to be more affirmative about gender equity, female scholars may benefit from being a woman in the academe.

## **5.5 Conclusion**

Four participants were interviewed in this study. They were from a variety of disciplinary backgrounds, including science, philosophy and education. By the time of the interviews, one participant was a Ph.D. candidate, three of them were already employed, among which one was working as an associate professor, one as an assistant professor, one at the advanced stage of her postdoctoral program and about to be reviewed for a professor's position. All of the participants were married, and two of them had children. They were all under the ages of 40. The three with academic positions in China at the time of the interview were working in institutions in large cities. The

geographical location of a university seemed to have affected its desirability to job candidates. Most often they prefer metropolitans in the economically more developed areas in China or a relatively large city close to their hometowns.

Regarding the reasons why they decide to pursue academic careers, all of them expressed their personal intellectual interests in academic research. Besides, one participant considered education a more meaningful profession than the private sector, another mentioned the influence from her parent's job, and two other participants regarded academia more familiar to them than corporate jobs and suited their personality.

Three of the participants looked for academic jobs in China exclusively, and one participant applied for jobs both in China and in western countries. Three of them implied that there were abundant job opportunities in China considering the large number of universities. Two of the participants in the field of education envisioned difficulties for them to find academic jobs in North America as foreign faculty.

In all the participants' experiences, the required qualifications for academic positions that were clearly stated by the institutions they applied for were doctoral degrees. Other than the degree, different institutions had different rules such as academic publications, age limits for candidates, and subtle preference to candidates with international education backgrounds. The number of academic publications was a significant criterion in both the application to academic jobs and the development of academic careers. The age limits appeared to be in line with educational policies including admission regulation and academic award and funding policies.

The information required by each application varied, but educational background and academic achievements such as publications were frequently required by all

institutions. In general, when forms needed to be filled, oftentimes online, more detailed and personal information regarding age, gender, and family were likely required.

Application documents submitted through personal connections, on the other hand, were usually a CV and documents about academic performance. The process and forms of interviews differed considerably depending on individual institutions and situations. The above narratives show that while some universities stuck to a two-round interview routine, some were more flexible about the sequence of procedures, some were more structured and formal, while others adopted relaxed interview formats to make interviews less stressful for job candidates. These differences often depended on the status of the university with higher tiered universities being less flexible and more formal during the application and interview process.

All participants explicitly or implicitly suggested that the perpetual gender norms constituted a barrier for females to succeed in Chinese academe through pinpointing various issues including the low female representation in high-ranking faculty positions, the expectations for female faculty members to do more teaching and service work, the bias against recruiting females in certain programs, the absence of support and resources for women to cope with challenging academic tasks, the assumption that women are naturally responsible for domestic duties and less devoted as scholars, and Chinese institution's lack of gender awareness.

Experiences of being educated in western countries did not necessarily have the same effects on individual participants' views about gender. Two of them confirmed that studying abroad had raised their awareness of gender equality and issues around gender due to the content of their study. One stressed how the strong female roles in academia

emboldened her to aspire higher and view herself as men's equal. One felt uncomfortable that gender was frequently talked about in western countries. These two participants believed that they were, or preferred to be, "gender blind" in their own interactions with men and women.

Though their international education background gave all participants more leverage in securing academic jobs in China, it also brought about risks such as difficulty in translation between English and Chinese and the inconvenience in arranging for interviews due to geographical distance. In the next chapter, I will analyze these findings in light of my theoretical framework, feminist thoughts and feminist standpoint theory, and discuss my research data in connection with existing academic studies about gender and higher education.



## **Chapter 6**

### **6 Discussion**

In this chapter, I analyze the research data from the theoretical perspectives of feminist thoughts and feminist standpoint theory (FST). I arrange this chapter into four sections on the ground that FST is simultaneously the method of the study, epistemology, social theory, and philosophy of science. First, I examine the patriarchal nature of the academe and how institutional gender bias, unwillingness to provide support, and exploitation shape the participants' experiences in higher education. Second, I problematize the prevalence of meritocracy and trace the fixation on measurability of performance to neoliberalism and the rigid masculine objectivity that dominate knowledge production in academia. Following this, I discuss the discrepancy between higher institutions' claims of equality and their lack of commitment in reality, and expose how strategic gender-based discrimination and bureaucratic approaches restrict the career mobility of female candidates. I argue that meritocracy and mismanagement in recruitment practices affect applicants of academic jobs negatively, especially female scholars. Finally, I consider participants' agency, self-construction of identity, and divergent attitudes toward gender equality and equity in academia. Probing into commonalities and diversities in the participants' standpoints, I try to reach a collective consciousness generated from their own voices and lived realities.

#### **6.1 Women in Academe and Gendered Experiences**

Surviving and contriving to thrive in the academy, women have confronted hardship and gender-specific restrictions. In what follows, I dissect the patriarchal nature of Chinese higher education and how it affects women in the academe. Depending on the

lived realities excerpted from the participants' collective standpoint as women in academia who aspire to scholarly careers, I examine thematic issues including female underrepresentation in higher ranks, institutions' discriminatory hiring practices and gender stereotypes, lack of support and consideration to women's needs, and exploitation of women's labour in academia. The issues reveal how institutional bias and gendered expectations pose challenges to females and shaped the participants' experiences in higher education institutions, especially when they looked for academic positions.

All participants observed the underrepresentation of women in higher-ranking positions in the Chinese academy. This is visible from their experiences as job applicants oftentimes interviewed by a group of full professors and university executives in which males were the majority. Two of them articulated that their respective fields, philosophy and science, are male-dominant areas. One participant, Xiayue, noted that although education is considered female-dominant, the hiring committees she encountered were predominantly male. This observation affirms the conclusions reached by Gaskell et al. (2004) and Rhoads and Gu (2012) indicating that advancing academic career and entering high-rank positions are difficult for female scholars. Feminist standpoint theorists, some of whom also female scholars who live and work from the margin in academia such as hooks (1990) and Collins (1997), have addressed this underrepresentation by revealing that female scholars in higher education institutions are allocated subordinate positions because the public social space of academy is not regarded as places where women belong.

The obstacles for women to climb the ranks can be further tied to a lack of mentors and female role models, discriminatory stereotypes targeting women, and overall lack of

support for female scholars. Zhengnan's experience encapsulates the importance of mentors and female role models. She recounted that she looked up to a female professor she had during her doctoral study in the United Kingdom as an admirable role model who inspired her to be a good researcher. While expressing the encouragement she derived from the female professor, she emphasized that this professor stood out given the deficit of successful females in the faculty and in the field. Working and studying in China, she recalled that there were no such exemplary female role models for her. The fact that the participant found no equivalent role models during her employment in Chinese university tells a story of scarcity. Furthermore, the unavailability of role models and the hardship for women to enter the territory of academia and academic leadership form a downward spiral that continuously undermines women's development in academia.

Based on the participants' narratives, it is reasonable to say that family responsibilities, maternity leave, and caring for children are among the major concerns when female applicants are appraised by universities as academic job candidates in China. The caring and family duties women do or are expected to do need to be understood from the lens of feminist materialism (Dowling, 2012; Hartsock, 1983a; Smith, 1974) that women's lived experiences are shaped by their close contact with the material world. Institutions' concern works on a simple perceived logic: once married, females' role as caregivers for family members and principal undertakers of housework and domestic affairs inevitably distracts women from their work, and that having children is bound to cause severe career interruptions. Domestic responsibilities are well-documented as a drawback in women's careers in the existing literature about gender inequality in academia and more general workplaces. For example, Rhoads and Gu

(2012) exposed the frustration female scholars face in balancing family and work, and Mason et al. (2013) used the term "the baby penalty", meaning that female scholars who have children confront more obstacles in getting promotions and achieving success in academia.

Furthermore, regardless of the female candidates' actual marital status and family plan, institutions simply assume that the inevitability of family duties will fall to women and undermine their devotion to their academic careers. In other words, institutional discrimination often operates on the shaky ground of this kind of taken-for-grantedness. This indicates how the material conditions of women's life reproduce gender inequalities and social inequity. This finding further affirms the claims of Sinha Mukherjee (2015), Nozaki et al. (2009), Cooke (2010), and He and Zhou (2018) that obstinate traditional gender norms continue to designate family and marriage as the predominant female domain where women are assigned this unpaid labour, leading to obstructions and discrimination in women's participation in general workplaces and academic professions. Such bias, widely existing and accepted as commonplace by the general society, influences the process that allows women into or keeps them out of the academy as professionals. This illustrates the persistence of traditional gender stereotypes in higher education and in Chinese society.

Underlying the supposedly inescapable feminine disadvantages is the institutions' reluctance to support women once they have been 'admitted' into the ivory tower. In the participants' narratives, institutional sensitivity about and disfavour against female candidates' family responsibilities indicates both great awareness yet disregard of female scholars' material conditions, the actual labour they do to serve the society, and their

needs for acknowledgement and support. This was illustrated by the four participants' experiences that large prominent universities give little consideration to female scholars' needs when it comes to women's family responsibilities. Similar arguments can be found in the works of Moss-Racusin et al. (2013), Mason et al. (2013), and Rhoads and Gu (2012) who have argued that universities neglect the actuality that female faculty suffer from coping with the demands of private life and academic work and allocate little resources to help women in academia. Instead of investing in childcare facilities, helping with career reentry and coping strategies, easing workload for pregnant women, or offering flexible working hours to reduce pressure on time management, institutions are much inclined to maintain the status quo in which male performance is the norm and masculine ways of acting and knowing reign (Smith, 1974, 1999). The lack of material support has worsened the ways in which women's material labour reproduce oppression and inequality (Hartsock, 1983a, 1983b).

Both during the hiring and the assessment for promotion, most institutions insisted on measuring women against the same standards created by and based on the conditions of men regardless of women candidates' lived experience outside of academic work. For instance, Xiayue suggested that the requirements imposed on all candidates for professor positions are consistently equal. Thus, women who take maternity leave have to accomplish the same level of academic productivity with other female and male candidates. For a tenure track position, the clock continues to tick regardless of family caregiving responsibilities. It is a matter of "up or out" as three of the participants who already work in universities put it. To comply with such strict rules, female scholars are left out of institutional support and must rely solely on themselves and family aid.

Zhangnan's reliance on parents' aid with childcare and tendency to spend extra hours and holiday times on academic research epitomizes academic women's dilemmas in balancing family and career simultaneously. Thus, through their actions and inactions, universities convey the idea that females are the anomalies, that Chinese academe is and continues to be a male-dominant institution that does not facilitate the existence and development of women scholars (Smith, 1999; Jaggar, 2004).

Adding to this bias and absence of support is the institutions' exploitation of women's physical, intellectual, and emotional labour on the basis of stereotypical gender norms (Hochschild, 1983; Dowling, 2012). Shiwei and Wenqi perceived the ways in which females in higher education institutions are expected to and socialized into doing more administrative and caring work. Serving hot beverage for their seniors and male peers is a pertinent example of how women's implication with the material world lead to extra labour in both domestic and professional settings and caused feminine vulnerability to exploitation. Xiayue and Zhengnan indicated the institutions' emphasis on new faculty member's ability to teach and the feminine specialty in being more "amiable" than male professors during recruitment and evaluation. On top of expectations and job assignments, Shiwei exhibited her willingness to support female students and scholars, which is representative of like-minded female professors who dedicate time to supporting and helping other women in higher education. these are affective labour that women do that are often undervalued or even overlooked by institutions.

The time and energy it takes for women to perform gendered expectations and norms remain largely undocumented by most institutions and seldom contribute to females' career development. As is argued by Gaskell et al. (2004), Guarino and Borden

(2017), and Heijstra et al. (2017), women professors devote more time to teaching and service works and less to research than their male counterparts. This illustrates that females' assigned roles in material activities have caused them disadvantages in moving up the academic hierarchy. It further exposes institutions' subtle way of taking advantage of women's labour and willful ignorance of females' contributions to the academe and demonstrates the patriarchal power that dominates higher education in China. Ahmed (2017) documented the feeling of weariness women have suffered from daily and inconspicuous sexism as being gradually worn down and worn out. It explains the fatigue females experience due to the extra emotional and physical efforts they make and how they are stopped from advancing their academic careers. "We can be worn down as well as becoming down" (Ahmed, 2017, p. 247). Like higher education institutions in North America and the United Kingdom where Smith (1987, 1999), Ahmed (2017), and Gaskell et al (2004) are positioned within, the findings from this study demonstrate how Chinese higher education institutions are also androcentric and inhospitable towards women.

## **6.2 Neoliberalism, Masculine Objectivity, and Equity**

The previous discussion has dwelled on the patriarchal nature of Chinese higher education by revealing how gender-based discrimination and biased expectations challenge female scholars' entrance to and development in academe. The unfairness of assessment has been touched upon regarding the lack of consideration of female's additional household and childcaring responsibilities. In this section, I focus on the interplay between politics and knowledge in Chinese academia by problematizing normative evaluation criteria in connection with the effects of neoliberalism and related masculine objectivity. Combining feminist standpoint consciousness and conclusions

extracted from existing literature, I demonstrate that the superficially gender-neutral excellence-based assessment system is simplistic and insensitive and its origin in neoliberalism and masculine objectivity reveals the patriarchal power dominating higher education and knowledge production.

The quantity and quality of academic publications are recognized by all participants as a significant criterion in both the application to academic jobs and the promotion of academic careers. From their transnational experiences, participants indicated that the value of research output is not unique to Chinese institutions, but prevalent in many universities around the world. They also implied that the reason why this criterion is widely applied is that it is widely viewed as objective and unbiased. Wenqi sees trying to get more publications as one of the most effective ways to increase her competitiveness and considered gender irrelevant in this process. Zhengnan, who made a major breakthrough in her career largely due to her extraordinary publication output, believes that academia advocates fair competition by viewing publications as the major criteria for academic success. Similarly, Xiayue supported her conviction that gender inequality is "not an issue" in Chinese academe with the fact that research output and excellence are the basis upon which candidates are evaluated.

It is safe to say that the efforts women make to comply the measurable stand of academic excellence has become an important part of their material struggle (Hartsock, 1983a; Jaggar, 2004). An examination of the ostensibly universal and gender-neutral merit-based system of measuring academic productivity reveals that academic excellence is an inherently discriminative construction that perpetuates gender inequity and injustices in other forms. To start with, it is a gendered practice. Scholars such as West et



al. (2013), Knobloch-Westerwick and Glynn (2013), and Maliniak et al. (2013) have thoroughly argued that publishers in all disciplines favoured male-authored articles over those by female authors, that women are not likely to be credited as the first author when they work together with men in research projects, and that citation activities demonstrate discrimination against and constraints for female authors.

Worse still, the stress laid on the number of publications works together with age limit to set back females' aspirations in the academe, which is another persuasive example of material conditions shaping women's experiences and reinforcing gender biases in academia. I have discussed above that it is harder for women to publish, that women's domestic responsibilities impact their research time, and that female academics tend to devote more time to teaching and doing administrative or supportive works than to research (Gaskell et al., 2004; Guarino & Borden, 2017; Heijstra et al., 2017). It may take a longer period of time for women to get the required number of publications for tenure and/or promotion. Furthermore, academic publication is a colonial construct. Prominent international journals and databases constitute a predominantly western, male, white system that has overwhelming power in the production and validation of academic knowledge (Harding, 1992). When certain major international journals are valued more over others, such as the obsession with SSCI articles, non-western non-English articles are excluded from what is valued in academia (Hartsock, 1983a; Collins, 1986). Based on the above discussion, it is safe to conclude that focusing only on academic productivity reproduces inequities in academia.

The pervasiveness of meritocracy is symptom of the neoliberal emphasis on measurability, marketization, and individualism. It is contended by Cooke (2010) as well

that marketization and globalization have been leading to gender inequality in China. In the age of education business, figure-driven measurements are prevalent in higher education institutions that run on corporate principles. The effects of marketization and globalization are further illustrated by academic institutions' enthusiasm about capital (Hartsock, 1983a, 1983b), leading some to refer to these processes as academic capitalism (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004).

Participants in this study determined that universities specifically preferred hiring individuals with doctoral degrees from foreign higher education institutions, especially those that are high on the global rankings since this represents valuable educational capital. In addition, various age limits exercised in the hiring process and funding blatantly favoured younger candidates who were considered to contribute more effective human capital to the institution. In one of the participants' experiences, to compete with topnotch institutions in large cities in China, universities in less developed areas tried to attract candidates with desirable educational capital by offering high salary, benefits, local research funding, and better interview experiences.

The fetish of neoliberal managerialism and profitability in higher education derives largely through the abstract masculinity and false claim of objectivity prevailing the academe. As Smith (1974) and Hartsock (1983a) have problematized, a history of male dominance and masculine way of thinking have reproduced knowledge that has preserved injustice and undermined females' standpoint, posing serious challenges for female scholars. Managerialism and the insistence that women meet the same requirements as men in academia are insensitive and unjust in the light of disadvantages inflicted on women (Smith, 1987, 1974). As Zhang (2010) has found out in her research on sources of

stress confronting academics in Chinese research universities, female academics suffer higher levels of stress trying to both cope with challenging academic tasks and accomplish family duties, which is not a surprise in light of the above discussion concerning how women often labour under the two highly demanding institutions of family and education. Nonetheless, male-based institutional rules continue to overlook the systematic disadvantages and family responsibilities women have and leave females to cope with the difficulties alone without assistance from universities or reliable social support networks. The entrenchment of neoliberal ideology not only manifests the necessity to fight masculine-oriented institution rules, but also the urgency to tackle challenges to equity posted by neoliberalism.

There can be multiple reasons why the majority of participants have taken the normative academic output as unproblematic and self-explanatory. An undeniable fact is that although not necessarily fair, meritocracy is among the few mechanisms that makes it possible for women to enter public spaces such as education and professional life. From the participants' experiences, it is often the measurement of excellence that made it possible for women to compete with men when applying for academic positions. Underneath this phenomenon, it has been pointed out that women's marginalized position in the academy means that they remain subject to a career trajectory designed by and for males (Harding, 2004a, 2004b; Jaggar, 2004). More importantly, the acceptance of and, in some cases, even faith in meritocracy among participants illustrates the interplay of power and knowledge within their higher education contexts. The dominant power in society and in higher education generates and verifies a rhetoric so compelling that it is hard for individuals who reside in the system to resist, be aware of and even acknowledge

(Harding, 1997; Smith, 1999). Female scholars, anomalies trying to fit in the androcentric space of higher education, are inevitably indoctrinated by the taken-for-granted idea that merit evaluation is objective, fair, and legitimate (Collins, 1986; Harding, 1992). This verifies feminist standpoint theorists' contemplations that a certain standpoint achieved by a social group both enables and limits their potential to understand the reality they live (Harding, 2004a). I will revisit this in the following section in connection with participants' different perspectives toward gender equity.

### **6.3 Institutional Door, or a Solid Wall**

Institutions' recruitment procedures are comparable to a door for job candidates to enter higher education institutions. It is not a door that lets everyone in but instead a selective device that admits some while rejecting others. In her insightful dissections about life in higher education and other social institutions, Ahmed (2017) has experienced the same door with the power that "decides who can reside there, who can be legitimately employed there" (p. 119). She described the systematically dominant power as "a mechanism that enables an opening and a closing" (Ahmed, 2017, p. 120). For some who are not permitted to pass through the door, the door turns into a solid wall, a wall of refusal. I have briefly discussed above how institutions may appear to have an open door to all aspiring scholars, while clinging to gender stereotypes and reproducing gender inequity through meritocracy and figure-driven assessment measures. In this part, I further analyze the strategic gender-based discrimination targeting women and institutions' obstructive practices in recruitment to shed light on the operations of the institutional door in order to reveal how it works to include or exclude.

Applying for academic positions, the participants came up against such a mechanism that decides if they will be allowed to enter the space of the academy. As female scholars with marginal positionality in academia (Collins, 1986; Smith, 1987; hooks, 1990), they had to learn how the mechanism works and how to work with it. They experience when it is open and welcoming, when it becomes a barrier they have to overcome, and when it is shut and insurmountable. At first glance, the door to becoming a professor seems to be open to all candidates with a Ph.D. degree. But at a closer look, participants soon discover the obvious exclusion criteria such as age limits and preferences to transnational education experiences, especially those in internationally top-ranking universities. Besides explicit refusals, the door is instilled with invisible techniques that further functions to obstruct some people from getting in. Ahmed (2017) captured the elusive nature of the wall in that only those who are hindered can feel the obstruction and frustration. From the participants' standpoint as job applicants and women in academia, I tease out moments of frustration about the invisible obstructions.

The participants were articulate about the covert nature of higher education institutional discrimination against women. Although it is common for female candidates to face questions regarding their marriage and family, communication in this regard often happens during informal occasions and the inner logic as such is not to be overt. This is evident in the participants' shared opinion that universities will never "say it apparently" but instead only exercise their gender bias in closed-door meetings in order not to leave a record. As Wenqi and Zhennan suggested, gender equality is equivalent to "political correctness" for Chinese universities. It is not hard to conclude that institutions are mindful that asking female candidates about their personal life and using this information

against them is wrong. The gender-based discrimination targeting women is therefore intentionally or unintentionally strategic. Ahmed (2017) explains that sexism is so deeply embedded in our daily and institutional life that it is both powerful and intangible. There is not a paper trail or substantial proof. Those who are wronged may feel the wrongdoing but are rarely able to put their fingers on it. Likewise, participants have indicated that institutions maintain the gender-equal narrative and everyone simply accepts it as a fact, as something that has arrived long ago and not to be questioned.

On the surface, institutions appear as the upholders of gender equity. Occasionally, female scholars are even intentionally included in an interview so that there is at least a woman candidate. “But just because they invite you does not mean they expect you to turn up” (Ahmed, 2017, p. 129) or that you will be supported. From their standpoint of the margin, female candidates are acutely aware of the thought process universities go through around marriage and childcare and the institutions’ favouritism to men. This consciousness about the implicit nature of sexism can be compared with Ahmed’s (2017) experience in doing diversity work in universities in that both female scholars and diversity workers share the marginal standpoint as the minorities in institutions. Ahmed (2017) has contended that universities often use the language of equality and diversity as a mask to conceal the absence of commitment to equality and diversity, resulting in the diversity workers’ and the marginalized members’ experiences of a gap between the symbolic institutional rhetoric and their lived reality (Smith, 2004).

A common experience extracted from the participants’ encounters with institutions during the job application process is the information asymmetry. All participants revealed difficulties in finding recruitment information for academic positions in China. They

commonly expressed that unlike corporations that actively go to career fairs and advertise about recruitment through media platforms, Chinese universities do not have a regular way to post job openings, making it very hard to gather such information. All of them tried both accessing job opening information online and through personal connections. Two of them clearly stated that personal interactions, as a channel of job opening information, application submission, and contact with hiring groups, were more effective than the often-futile online applications. Evidently, the door is elusive and inaccessible, entailing great energy, social capital, and mental labour (Dowling, 2012; Hochschild, 1983).

hooks (1990) and Collins (1997) have recounted that black scholars in the academe, and black people as the outsiders within the society in general, being able to see from both the outside and the inside, have acquired understanding about the margin where they reside and the space of the dominant social groups. For people who are located on "the edge", knowledge about the centre is a survival skill they have to master (hooks, 1990). It is deemed essential by the participants to gather information about the institutions they applied for and learn more about the specific faculty they were going to work with. As candidates, all participants claimed to have tried to obtain certain knowledge about the institution, some before and some during the application process. In general, it is relatively easy for applicants to learn about the location, status, and prestige of a certain institution in China. Besides the general information, knowledge about the faculty members, especially those who are going to be at the hiring committee, is commonly considered necessary. It was not easy, however, for candidates to gain accurate information about the institutions without personal connections regardless of their

genders. A wall denying the outsiders access to information from the inside then exacerbates the adversity facing the candidates.

Information asymmetry and lack of transparency limit the career mobility and prospective of candidates for employment positions. Though ambiguity and opaqueness confront both female and male candidates, these two factors particularly constrain female candidates' entry and advancement in academia since they are more vulnerable socio-economically. Participants reported high levels of ambivalence and contingency experienced in their interaction with Chinese universities. Wenqi's experience with the university which took six months to inform her about the second interview illustrates how the lack of communication and ambiguity poses severe difficulties for job candidates. The majority of the participants have further identified uncertainty in the institutions' decision-making. They were rarely told the results when they were unsuccessful with their job applications. And some of them witnessed unexpected drastic changes in the decision institutions made. From the standpoint of the participants, chance play a crucial role in their job applications.

The role of chance and uncertainty manifests instability in women's academic career and further causes the invisibly of options beyond job security and reflects the steadfastness of patriarchal institutional tradition (Harding, 2004a, 2004b). The stories told by participants have jointly suggested the fundamental root of the excruciating uncertainty and lack of transparency: hierarchical structure of institutions and bureaucracy. As a result of such hierarchy and bureaucracy, female candidates demonstrated a lack of entitlement and prospects about their careers, which can be seen as a gained standpoint, an adaptation to marginality and unpredictability of their career



gains. For the participants, the objectives are often to accomplish short-term tasks, such as getting the job and then obtaining tenure, while long-term career plans and ambition about leadership roles are often absent and left to chance. They just wanted to get their feet in the higher education door.

Facing the contingency of a revolving door, women's career trajectory in academia appears to be opportunistic. Although the participants have attempted to cope with the many uncontrollable variables in the job application process by consciously releasing themselves from pressure and multiplying their applications to maximize their chances of success, the intangible obstacles of time cost and emotional burden were wearying. When the cost and risk is too high and the process too painfully uncertain, female scholars are likely to give up on applying for academic positions from the very beginning. As Zhengnan has expressed, the most challenging part for females to enter the academy may be to make that decision and the dedication, since women are more vulnerable to discriminations and exploitation from major social institutions such as family and education. While functioning to exclude women, the mechanism of how the institutional door becomes wall to female candidates remains invisible to many. In Ahmed's (2017) words, when the marginalized who are stopped by the walls try to "talk about walls, the walls become phantom walls" (p. 142).

## **6.4 Feminist Standpoints, Intentionality, and Subjectivity**

Besides standpoint realities generated from the participants' lived experiences, their narratives are imbued with senses of self, autonomy, and divergent worldview forged through their respective positions in society and encounters with higher education institutions. Hartsock (1983a) and Collins (1986) have argued that feminist standpoint

affords researchers potent visions into women's self-sovereignty and self-construction in their daily activities within patriarchal dominance. In this section, I explore the participants' agency, identity, and standpoint through the lens of FST and try to unravel the formation of feminist standpoint intentionality and subjectivity.

Resilience is an essential component in the collective standpoint the participants have achieved by endeavouring to attain academic developments and claiming spaces for women in academia. They demonstrated common awareness of the potential challenges in pursuing academic careers. Despite envisioned difficulties and hindrances, they forged ahead and were determined to seek academic careers. Gaskell et al. (2004) concluded that women have to make more efforts than men if they want to achieve the same in academia. From their subjugated positions in higher education, the participants are unanimously appreciative that female scholars have to "be much much better", in Zhengnan's words, than their male counterparts because of institutions' favouritism for men. To surmount systematic discriminations against women in the era of neoliberal managerialism, the most recognized measure the participants have simultaneously taken is to maximize their academic capital. It is, therefore, a consensus among participants that furthering their education abroad and obtaining outstanding academic accomplishments such as publications in highly ranked journals are the most effective ways that they intentionally use to gain leverage and overcome the barriers in their careers.

hooks (1990) called for black female scholars and all that are subjugated to embrace the margin as the place to refuse repression and exercise resistance. Purposefully utilizing their education attainment as transformative power, women claim their space in the academy and covert their marginality into a position of strength. As is vividly portrayed

by Shiwei, they “bite the bullet and strike for excellence” and transgress the boundaries of the male-dominant academia. They become “space invaders” in the academy, in history, and in the domain of knowledge (Ahmed, 2017). The conscious efforts they have made through determination and commitment epitomize defiance of exclusion and women’s resilience against discrimination (hooks, 1990). In this sense, female scholars’ education drive and achievement mean more than individual success, but also needs to be seen as activism they do together through intentional political struggles to resist patriarchal hierarchy in education and male dominance (Hartsock, 1983a; Smith, 1999, Harding, 2004a).

Collins (1986) has expressed that self-valuation and self-definition are important themes in black feminist thought sprang from black women’s standpoint since it challenges the stereotypical images of African-American women and the dominance of knowledge production. During their academic endeavours, the participants in my study gained not just education, but also purpose, self-affirmation, and self-empowerment. Concerning motivations to look for academic jobs, all participants expressed their enthusiasm for academic research. Their educational goals were more than mere job security, but constituted their life goals. This pronounced interest in academic advancement further demonstrates foresight and confidence in their respective academic careers albeit the various restrictions they envisage. Braving the conventional prefabricated idea that the academy is not a place for women, these participants stand as equals and even transcend their male peers and construct their sense of self within and beyond educational contexts through self-validation and self-recognition.

Under the common assumption that women and men are already equal in China, the heroic resistance and remarkable self-fabrication of women is often overlooked by mainstream male-centered institutional knowledge. Moreover, female scholars are more inclined to negotiate obstacles in mild and low-profile ways rather than to rebel blatantly. This is demonstrated in the experiences of the participants in that they all followed male-centred career paths in academia and predetermined procedures. Beating men in their own game has been a thematic idea in the participants' narratives but none of them was expressly conceited about it. Three of the participants who applied for jobs in China exclusively attributed this choice to the need for them to carry out family responsibilities including being close and taking care of spouses, children, or parents. While seeing themselves capable professional scholars, they also identify as dedicated wives, mothers and daughters (Smith, 1974; Harding, 1997; Hartsock, 1997). In making their career choices, they tried to find middle grounds that both achieve their academic and personal goals and fulfil their family caregiving responsibilities.

The fluidity and dynamic nature of women's identity, as does the multiplicity and divergence of participants' ideas about gender equity in Chinese academia, characterizes what Haraway (1988) termed as "situated knowledge". Feminist standpoint theorists such as Harding (1992, 1997), Haraway (1988), and Wylie (2004) have theorized knowledge and subjectivity mediated through feminist standpoint as embodied, accountable, and therefore intrinsically heterogeneous because of the dissimilarity among knowledge agents. In the context of persistent patriarchal dominance and inequality, all forms of knowledge are situated and knowledge from marginal social positions is more apt to

mediate the imperfection of all standpoints and arrive at feminist objectivity that is reflexive and less partial (Haraway, 1988).

Indeed, the opinions held by participants about gender equity in Chinese academy diverged considerably. Shiwei, who had completed her PhD in the United States in philosophy, has criticized Chinese institutions' inadequacy in taking measures to advocate for gender equity and voiced keen willingness to take advantage of her ability and experiences to champion the collective progression of women in academia and society. From her vision as a marginalized female scholar, Shiwei understands the gravity of hardship females face and the importance of solidarity among women because the inequalities she has experienced, such as being rejected an academic job because of her gender. In Shiwei's case, a standpoint of resistance and unity is informed by her lived experience from the margin, a site she has inverted to opposition against oppression. Shiwei's standpoint embodies what Ahmed (2017) define as diversity workers in institutions, those who "willfully" keep trying to effect change in the inert institutions as if chipping slowly through brick walls. It is also a standpoint that is achieved through constant struggle, a relentless action that generates knowledge about the institutions (Hartsock, 1983a, 1997; Harding, 2004a; Jaggar, 2004; Ahmed, 2017).

Wenqi and Zhengnan exhibited a sense of powerlessness toward the tenacious gender stereotypes and insidious institutional discrimination. Their solutions to systematic disadvantages female scholars suffer concentrated on self-improvement, seeking higher academic achievements, and being more flexible and adaptable to make progress under adverse circumstances. Powerlessness as a standpoint signifies the internalization of male-dominance and the androcentric knowledge system (Harding,

1997, 2004a) and also strategic navigation through patriarchal hierarchy. Ahmed (2017) has described that when the oppressed notice or speak out about inequalities, they are seen as the cause of the problem and may confront even more restrictions. "When we speak about what we come up against, we come up against what we speak about" (Ahmed, 2017, p. 148). Female scholars' positions in academia mandate that they avoid causing more restrictions than the adversity they already face and blend in. It is particularly palpable in Zhengnan's fieldwork story that female scholars have to assimilate, an effort to put our particulars aside and "to reside as well as we can in the spaces that are not intended for us" (Ahmed, 2017, p. 9).

Unlike the standpoints of other participants, Xiayue seemed to have denied the existence of gender inequality in Chinese academy and embraced the idea of excellence and gender assimilation. In light of the preceding discussions about gender-based discrimination and meritocracy, feminist standpoint theory appears here to be producing contradictory claims. To begin to make sense of this point of view, we need to bear in mind that the oppressed groups can be more prone to believe the dominant groups' ideas about social relations, thus their opinions may not be automatically reliable (Harding, 2004b). Harding (1997, 2004b) has argued that FST aims to understand and remodel power relations. The outward incongruity in female scholars' standpoints discloses precisely the tenacity of male dominance and masculine objectivity and the situatedness of standpoint knowledge.

To begin with, the oppressed are often led to believe the misrepresentation of power relations generated from the standpoint of the privileged groups given the difficulties to alter the dominant masculine way of understanding reality (Harding, 2004b; Jaggar,

2004). Secondly, Ahmed (2017) has expatiated the subjugated can feel more comfortable with the dominant narrative, since starting to perceive the restrictions we have been taught to overlook is emotionally demanding and endangers the existing connections we have with the society. “Leaving a well-trodden path can be so difficult: it can mean leaving a support system” (Ahmed, 2017, p. 46). Thirdly, Collins (1997) has advocated the appreciation of the intersectionality of individual's position as a lens to understand personal differences. Female scholars constitute a diverse social group in which both marginal and dominant positionalities intersect. One’s situated knowledge and experience cannot always be the same with others’. Borrowing Ahmed’s (2017) analogy, those who pass the door easily may not notice the existence of the door.

Undeniably, the marginality of females in academia and in the general social context is bound to engender imperfections and diversity in individuals’ standpoints. But it is not FST's objective to reach a homogenous fixed truth by taking the oppressed groups’ claim as inherently credible without critical examination (Harding, 1997, 2004b; Hartsock, 1997; Collins, 1997). Standpoint knowledge is achieved by communities rather than individuals and aims at collective consciousness through which societal power relations can be better explained (Harding, 1997; Hartsock, 1997; Collins, 1997; Wylie, 2004). It is the imperfections and multiplicity of situated standpoints that piece together the whole and lead to a feminist standpoint that yields less biased truth and potential to change existing power structures (Hartsock, 1997; Collins, 1997; Harding, 1997; Jaggar, 2004).

In the next chapter, I draw conclusions based on the foregoing discussions and further my arguments on the implications of FST and narrative inquiry.

## **Chapter 7**

### **7 Conclusion and Implications**

In this chapter, I summarize the study and present key findings and arguments reached by the preceding chapters. I then further discuss the implications and significance of the study in connection with the use of feminist standpoint theory in conceiving and conducting this study and in countering dominant ideas about gender equity in higher education and societal contexts. Following this, I consider the limitations of this study, propose suggestions to Chinese higher education institutions, and recommendations for future research. Finally, I conclude this thesis with personal reflections building on my own experiences and positionality and thoughts about this study as the researcher.

#### **7.1 Summary of the Study**

This study aimed at countering the dominant narrative of gender equity in China and the neoliberal figure-driven claim of gender parity and objectivity based on women's enrollment in tertiary education. To achieve the goal of disrupting simplistic conclusions and achieving nuanced understandings, this study positions internationally trained Chinese female scholars' lived experience in the centre and explores how gender and international education background shape their experiences in finding academic positions in China. The following questions guided my study:

- 1) What are the experiences of internationally trained Chinese females in securing an academic position in China after their graduate study?
- 2) What challenges, including gender-specific challenges, do they confront in their search for an academic position and how do they navigate these challenges?
- 3) In what ways do they construct their sense of self as women throughout their



experience with higher education and finding academic jobs in China, and how do they perceive western education influence their awareness of gender?

Feminist standpoint theory (FST) served as the epistemological and theoretical compass of this qualitative inquiry delving into participants' lived experiences in seeking academic positions in China. FST advocates that social groups lacking socio-economic and political privilege, such as women, are better situated than the privileged groups in understanding and questioning society and power relations in it. By examining and analyzing women's embodied experience, the knowledge that can be used to change power relations and oppressive social institutions will emerge. To achieve the goal of accounting for power and knowledge production, feminist standpoint theory moves to put women's lived experience in the centre of knowing and understanding, specifically how women make sense of their own experiences. Through paying attention to women as knowers, knowledge and understanding can be extracted from women's unique standpoints to challenge the existing discourse and social institutions.

Informed by the purpose of the study and FST, the study is rooted in the qualitative and interpretive paradigm. I adopted narrative inquiry as the main methodology to allow the research participants to recount their experiences in their own voices and facilitate the furthering of understandings on the conditions and sense of self of Chinese females in relation to their specific social positions, educational backgrounds, and personal worldviews. The main method of data collection was semi-structured interviews. All interviews were conducted under approval from the ethics board of the University of Western Ontario. The research participants were recruited strategically to diversify disciplinary backgrounds and locations. Four female scholars participated in this study,

two of them are in the field of education, one in philosophy, and one in geoscience. One participant studied in the U.S., one in Britain, one in Canada, and one had studied in the U.S. and Canada. Pseudonyms were used when referring to the participants in the narratives presented as research findings to protect their anonymity.

An interpretive approach was used for data analysis from a hermeneutic and phenomenological lens. Thematic analysis is the main method this study employed to examine the data collected in the form of personal story-telling. The research has found that female scholars confront various gender-specific challenges in trying to obtain academic positions and developing academic careers in Chinese higher education. The challenges participants most commonly talked about during their applications for academic positions, interviews and general experiences in higher education in China include discriminatory recruiting practices, underrepresentation of women in higher-ranking positions, the persistence of traditional gender stereotypes, lack of support for female faculty members, normative evaluation criteria, and institutional exploitation of women's labour.

Though Chinese higher education institutions claim to be fair and just during the recruitment processes, there is a lack of commitment to fairness in reality. To begin with, the superficially gender-neutral excellence-based assessment system emphasizing academic publications is closely related to neoliberal measurability and masculine objectivity and works to the disadvantage of women scholars together with other unfair rules such as age limits. Further, participants reported implicit gender-based discrimination strategically targeting females and practices that exacerbate the uncertainty and time cost in the job application process. Though the bureaucratic

practices challenge candidates of all genders, female scholars are more vulnerable to risks resulted from the vagueness and time cost.

Building on their stories, this study explores female scholars' intentionality and subjectivity in their academic and personal developments. Participants collectively viewed seeking graduate education in western countries as an effective way of gaining high educational achievements and maximizing their chances to secure academic positions in China. In pursuing high education attainments and academic careers, they forged senses of agency and self and self-validation and self-valuation in surpassing their male counterparts. Yet their attitudes toward gender equity vary greatly. Through feminist standpoint analyses, this study argues that the divergence in their views about gender equity resides mainly in their marginal positionalities in academia and society. This study shows that experiences with western education and exposure to conversations around gender may not necessarily lead to great awareness of gender equity or identification with feminism.

Notably, as is pointed out in the discussion chapter, many of the gender-specific challenges and issues faced by female scholars applying academic positions and/or working in higher education in China unraveled by this study are also found by previous studies done outside of China that are included in the literature review of this study. This project then corroborates with and mutually testifies with scholarly articles regarding the situations and hinderances confronting women in academia and in the workplace globally. Considering the scarcity of equivariant information found in Chinese academic research and in relation with female faculty members in Chinese higher education institutions, this study further reveals the gap in existing literature and the urgent need for

academic attention, particularly qualitative efforts, to be given to Chinese women in higher education. In what follows, I consider the implications and significance of the study and make suggestions mainly pertaining Chinese higher education. Yet it needs to be clarified that these implications and suggestions are bear significance beyond the Chinese context and are relevant to the promotion of gender equity in higher education and employment world-wide.

## **7.2 Implications, Significance, and Limitations**

Women's improved education attainment has been documented and studied by institutions and scholars. Arguably, based on the literature review, studies about women's educational gain in China are oftentimes statistics-driven and informed by the traditional scientific objectivity. This study aims at countering the dominant narrative about gender equity, disrupting masculine objectivity, and adding nuanced and firsthand understanding of women's developments in higher education. Harding (2004a) defines feminist standpoint theory as "an achievement, something for which oppressed groups must struggle, something that requires both science and politics" (p.8). In this section, I expatiate on the implications and significance of this study by demonstrating the applications of FST as both a theoretical and methodological framework and the political implications of this feminist standpoint case study.

To begin with, I designed this study to explore how women with some of the highest possible education attainments experienced their interactions with higher education institutions as job applicants. I position these women as knowers because their shared acts of trying to find academic positions in universities can be seen as a collective political struggle, an act of knocking at the door of higher education institutions, of

finding out when and how the door works, of interrogating the policies and practices of these institutions. Comparable to black women, female Chinese international students are “outsiders within” in the various ways they are positioned in a network of power relations according to different social-economic status and cultural backgrounds (Collins, 1986; hooks, 1990). They are simultaneously participating in and excluded from the modern neoliberal capitalist mobility as women in an androcentric society, as female scholars in the male-dominated academia, and as international students who had to live in another country, learn another culture and language, and acquire a set of knowledge in that foreign language. With their acquired consciousness about the western world, they went back to the motherland to reconstitute their own positions in academia and society.

Positioning women’s embodied knowledge in the centre of inquiry allows this study to extract insights into the interactions between education and gender equity and understand real-life challenges facing female scholars in terms of their particular standpoints and experiences. Exactly as is pointed out by Collins (1986), conventional research methods reduce women’s lived experiences into a group of pre-defined variables (in the Chinese context of existing literature, the variables included household registration, rurality or urbanity, father’s education, etc.). As a result, gender equity and females’ educational attainments and careers in education have been viewed through one-size-fits-all approaches (Harding, 1986, 2004a) that provided linear and simplistic conclusions. This study is therefore meaningful in that it corrects the misrepresentation and misappropriation of female scholars’ lives by exposing their realities and opposing homogeneous one size fits-all-methods.

The study also validates women's agency and sense of self, situated feminist ways of knowing, and sheds light on the multiplicity of their standpoints embedded in various social positionalities and limitations in human cognition. Understanding women's experiences from their own voices and narrations means seeing women as both agents and actors, objects and subjects of knowledge (Haraway, 1997). Divisions in the participants' ideas about gender equity and institutions reflect the fluidity and complexity of women's standpoints and add depth to the perception of female scholars as a heterogeneous group that refuses to be generalized or streamlined. As is argued by Harding (1992), individual imperfect standpoints piece together the whole picture of community knowledge. There is no one single legitimate standpoint but instead imperfect, diverse, and even incongruous embodied visions that together constitute an assemblage (Harding, 1992; Haraway, 1997).

This study uses FST as a potent device to demystify the interplay between knowledge and power, and refute dichotomy and masculine objectivity (Collins, 1986; Haraway, 1997; Harding, 1992; Hartsock, 1983a; Smith, 1974). Traditional scientific way of knowing is profoundly influenced, today, by the prevailing neoliberal discourse that quantifies equality and the distinct tendency in the existing literature to simplify individual experiences and struggles by manipulating certain variables. It marginalizes the feminine, situated, individual, and nuanced knowledge as biased and inferior. Against this binarism and objectifying methodology endorsed by powerful social institutions, the understanding sprang from women's standpoints and lived experience is posed as a challenge.

On a macro level, the struggles that participants experienced in looking for academic positions, in negotiating various obstacles, and in performing womanhood while constructing their own identities, generate knowledge to interrogate academic hegemony and the authoritative version of reason and reality. On a micro level, this study constructs the daily and the individual as political and structural. It illustrates that the female scholars' daily encounters with higher education are infused with power dynamics which manifest higher education institutions' insensitivity and unresponsivity. From female scholars' standpoints and individual experiences, both commonality and distinctions contribute to an understanding of gender equality and equity in the context of education and the contemporary world we inhabit.

There are a number of limitations of the study. First, feminist standpoint and narrative inquiry both emphasize individuals' lived experiences. Building on such ideas, this study tried to maintain the richness of the narratives of each participant and has therefore only included four participants. The experiences of four women is certainly not sufficient to encompass the tapestry of the lives, actions, and feelings of Chinese women's experiences in higher education today. To achieve a better understanding, more women's voices should be included. Further, the data collection method shapes the data. The majority of the interviews were done virtually and in English, which could have affected the interactive communication between the participants and the researcher, and limited participants' expressions of subtlety and intricacies that are common in our lives. In addition, the various aspects of injustice discussed in this study were not fully gender-specific. Many of the obstacles are also pertinent to males. Yet this study was unable to involve men's perspectives due to the limited research scope.

### **7.3 Suggestions and Recommendations for Future Study**

Given the content and the purpose of the study, I provide suggestions to both Chinese higher education institutions and the academe and society in general. First and foremost, based on the analyses, it is palpable that traditional gender stereotypes are one of the biggest obstacles for female scholars to embark on and develop their academic careers as professionals. Universities, as the most prominent educational institutions, should commit to improve their gender awareness, try to create an equal and just working environment for females, and take women's needs into considerations. Regarding the actual recruiting practices and workplace policies, I urge universities to stop using female candidates' marriage and family plans to their disadvantage, and relieve age limits targeting women. The study illustrates that institutional bureaucracy in recruiting practices has resulted in hinderances for all job candidates regardless of their genders. Therefore, fairness in enrollment entails respect for job applicants and calls for institutions to be cautious not to abuse their dominance in the relational power during recruitment.

Universities as employers are obliged to support female employees in providing support and mitigating pressure. For instance, institutions can provide aid with childcare, adopt flexible working hours, help with career reentry and coping strategies, and alleviate workload and stress for pregnant women and women with young children. Universities must stop evaluating faculty members, especially female faculty, solely with numerical standards of academic productivity. Rather, excellence shall be considered in more wholistic and thorough respects. For faculty members, especially females, the promotion



policy should be more relaxed to take their job responsibilities and family duties into account.

For academic and societal contexts in general, I advocate for greater attention to women's lived experiences, struggles, and their own voices. Structural power insists on gender equity based on numbers and conventional scientific studies validate this narrative by producing numbers. In this process, women's daily experiences facing various difficulties and great efforts they make are invisible and dismissed. Instead of oversimplifying women's educational gain as the proof to gender parity and reducing individual lives into figures, we must promote sensitive and multi-dimensional perspectives that recognize women's realities, standpoints, and agency in their educational and career development. The academe has been recognized as a significant source of credible knowledge about our society. Academics are thus responsible for avoiding binarism and determinism in their research practices, exposing the power dynamic in knowledge production, and collectively combating neoliberal measurability and masculine objectivity.

This study explores the standpoints of a specific group of female scholars by focusing on a particular stage in their academic careers. It illuminates some of the unseen aspects of internationally trained Chinese female scholars' experiences with seeking academic positions in China. It is limited in many ways including the scope of discussions and the number of participants that were included. For future research, the following could be worthwhile areas to study:

- 1) Adding the perspective of an analysis of policy study to discern how the legislation of labour and employment and national and local policies about funding and

rewarding in academia impact academic institutions and therefore shape the experience of female scholars.

- 2) Introducing a comparative angle that examines the similarities and contrasts between candidates' experiences with applying and interviewing for academic positions in China and western countries, such as North America; or a comparison between those who were educated in China and internationally trained.
- 3) Delving deeper into the effects of education experiences in western countries on females' perceptions about gender equity and how different levels of gender awareness influence the ways in which females act and feel in academia.
- 4) Including the voices of administrative roles, such as presidents, provosts, and deans, and/or male faculty in institutions and inspect how their standpoints are about gender equity in academia and how the standpoints inform their actions.

## **7.4 Reflections and Concluding Thoughts**

Conducting this research has been a precious experience for me intellectually and personally. Not only have I learned about and furthered my understanding of gender and higher education and academic research, but I have also deliberated over my own standpoint, experiences, and intentions, and the connections between feminist thoughts and my study. In the final part of this thesis, I would like to offer my reflections and thoughts about this project as the researcher.

I came to this project as a Chinese woman, a former college graduate from a tier-one university in China, an ex-employee of a state-owned corporation, and an international graduate student currently pursuing a master's degree in the field of education in Canada. Beyond these social positionalities and labels, I am a self-identified feminist, or rather, a

student of feminism who is still learning and trying to make sense of the society, the many inequities we experience, and the globalized modernity we reside in. Always a top student, I used to believe that gender gaps in China are comparatively insignificant and education is bound to bring opportunities to success and more equal rights to us, Chinese women who work hard and stand out. Yet the life experiences of women I know and myself gradually changed my conviction. I came to realize that higher educational attainments did not necessarily improve our conditions as we believed and decided to further the understandings about women's developments in higher education and gender equity in China with the help of critical theories and feminist theories I learned in my master's study.

It is emphasized by feminist standpoint theorists (such as Haraway, 1988; Harding, 1986, 1992, 2004a; Hartsock, 1983a) that all knowledge is situated and recognizing the limitations in each embodied is an effective strategy to achieve objective, comprehensive, and accountable knowledge. My assumptions, interpretations, and approaches in doing this study are inevitably informed by my own lived experience and personal standpoint. To begin with, I have been conscious of the sensitivity of applying a Western feminist theory to a Chinese context. To avoid discrepancy, I take FST's key conception about social location and contextuality into consideration and try not to transplant but instead to reflexively make use of feminist thoughts and theories within the Chinese context. As the researcher, I relied on my own experience and knowledge to acclimatize FST to the research field.

Secondly, my own standpoint contributed to my comprehension of the inconsistency among participants' viewpoints and divergence between the participant's and my

personal perspective. By virtue of the prejudice and biased treatment toward women I have observed in my studying and working experiences in China, I assumed that every Chinese woman, regardless of their family or educational background, would have been exposed to some forms of gender-based discriminations and been able to recognize the unfairness as such. As a result, I was surprised and baffled when one of my participants articulated her denial of gender inequity and acceptance of meritocracy. As the interviews went on, I came to realize that sharing similar experiences does not mean they are automatically a group of perfect homogenous knowers and a collective standpoint is achieved through conscious efforts rather than simply gained by occupying certain positions in the society. What the participants knew as individual women that are located in various social groups may vary distinctly, but distinctions do not invalidate their respective embodied knowledge or the potential for their experience to become sites of analysis of power, knowledge, and social structure.

Thus, following Collins (1986), my lived experiences served as a solid source for me to act with integrity and reliability in conducting this study. My presentations, interpretations, and punctuations of the participants' life stories bear my standpoint as a feminist researcher who consciously utilizes critical feminist thoughts as a framework for examining social relations and females' actuality. As a Chinese woman who spent, so far, most of my life in China and completed my undergraduate degree in a Chinese university, as an ex-rookie who had multiple job application experiences there, as a former employee in a state-owned company in China for over six years where we frequently collaborated with higher education institutions, my experiences has become a

valuable asset and helped me communicate with and relate with my participants, and understand their standpoints with reflexivity and sensitivity.

This study examines and documents segments of women's realities in higher education by positioning women in the center of knowing and understanding their lives through their own voices. It authenticates women's lived experiences and validates women's intimate knowledge about social structure and power dynamics due to their marginal positions in society and their intentional endeavours to excel in the social spaces they occupy. It further illustrates that feminist subjects of knowledge are "embodied and visible", socially located as were the "multiple, heterogeneous and contradictory or incoherent" (Harding, 1992, p. 452, 454) objects of knowledge. Echoing standpoint theory, it stresses that knowledge is generated by communities instead of individuals (Harding, 1992). During my interactions with the participants, I find affinity, unity, as well as differences and disagreements. But more importantly, I find a shared standpoint of resilience and resistance to bias and obstacles in our academic careers. I would like to think of an alliance and community among my participants and myself in a collective struggle to bring this project into existence and to try to transform the academe.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A: Email Script for Recruitment

**Subject:** call for participation in research about Chinese women's experience with academic job application in China

Hello,

My name is ZHAO Fengchenzi and I am an MA student at UWO faculty of Education. I am conducting a study about internationally trained Chinese women's experiences with applying for academic positions in China. It is entitled *How Gender Shapes the Experiences of Chinese Females Educated Abroad In Finding Academic Positions in China: A Feminist Standpoint Theory Case Study*.

I would like to interview female Chinese international students who are in the process or who have had experience trying to find an academic job in China in the past decade. If this is your experience, I would like to invite you to participate in my study. Please read the attached letter of information and consent form to learn more about the study.

If you are interested in participating in this research contact me, the researcher, by email ([REDACTED]) or by phone at [REDACTED] Alternatively, the Principal Investigator, Dr. Marianne Larsen can be reached at [REDACTED] or by phone at [REDACTED].

Also, if you know of any other female Chinese international students who have also had experience trying to find a job in a Chinese university, please forward this email and attachments to them.

Thank you.

## Appendix B: Letter of Information

**Project Title:** How gender shapes the experiences of Chinese females educated abroad in finding academic positions in China: A feminist standpoint theory case study

**Principal Investigator:** Dr. Marianne Larsen, Full Professor, Faculty of Education, Western University, [REDACTED] [REDACTED]

**Additional Researcher:** Fengchenzi Zhao, MA candidate, Faculty of Education, Western University, [REDACTED] [REDACTED]

My name is Fengchenzi Zhao and I am an MA student in the Faculty of Education at Western University (Canada). I am currently working on a research project about internationally trained Chinese women's experiences with applying for academic positions in China. I am inviting you to participate in this international research study.

Education is widely recognized as fundamental to human rights and an essential path to narrowing gender disparity. But the correlation between education and empowerment of women in the era of globalization and neoliberalism has long been contested. Studies trying to address the interrelation among gender, education, employment and justice rarely shed light on the lived experience of women who went through the transition from schools to jobs. The obsession with economy and measurability is also rooted in the dominant narrative in China, a country influenced both by neoliberalism and communist ideology. Qualitative study on Chinese females' experiences with higher education in contemporary time is therefore in urgent need.

The study consists of semi-structured interviews, in which a set of predetermined questions are asked to start the conversation, and topics participants see pertinent are elaborated on and discussed. I employ narrative inquiry to guide my research and encourage participants to recount the story of their lived experience revolving higher education, international education, and applying academic positions, and their emotions and thoughts. The research questions guiding this study are “What are the expectations facing Chinese females educated abroad about securing an academic position in China after graduate study and how do their expectations differ from their actual experiences?”, “What gender-specific challenges, or gender-based discrimination, if any, do they experience in their search for an academic position and how do they navigate these challenges?”, & “In



what ways do they perceive western education influence or inform their experience with finding academic jobs in China, and how do they feel, what emotions do they have, about such experiences?”

If you want to participate in this study you should identify yourself as female; hold Chinese citizenship or had primary and secondary education in China; have received or are receiving tertiary education in English-speaking Western countries (e.g. Canada, United States, Britain, Australia, New Zealand); recently experienced being interviewed for an academic position in China (within the last 10 years). You also need to be able to respond to the interview questions in English.

Each interview is expected to last for approximately one to one and a half hours. Face-to-face conversations will be preferred at a location we agree on, which must be accessible to both the researcher and the participant. In the event that participants cannot be physically present, communication through Zoom (a virtual meeting application) may be employed to facilitate simultaneous dialogues. Recordings will be made by a voice recorder for transcription after the interviews with the consent of the participants. If you are interested in participating in the study, please respond by email (fzhao64@uwo.ca) indicating your interest and we will schedule an interview time. If participating in a face to face interview, you will be asked to complete the written consent form below. You do not waive any legal right by signing this consent form. Alternatively, participating in an interview that is not face-to-face, your verbal consent to participate in the study must be provided at the start of the interview. If you wish to provide verbal consent at the time of the virtual interview, please e-mail fzhao64@uwo.ca to confirm your interest in participating in this study and I will ask for your verbal consent to participate in this study at the beginning of the interview.

The implications of this research are trifold. 1) It seeks to understand the connections between education and gender equity through individuals’ lived experiences that epitomize such connections. 2) It adds the richness of female narratives and female epistemology and works toward the empowerment of women by attaching great importance to their knowledge. 3) It interrogates the prevailing narrative “more education and more equal” and the larger project of neoliberal discourse centered in measurability and objectivity, as stated before.

Participation in this research is voluntary and not mandatory in any way. There are no known or anticipated risks or discomforts associated with participating in this study. The activities can be stopped at any time if you experience any discomfort or fatigue. You may refuse to answer any questions or withdraw from the study at any time with no effect on your academic status. If you decide to withdraw, any information collected prior will not be used. No new information will be collected without your permission. The information collected will be used for research purposes only, and neither your name nor information will be used in any reports, publications or presentations of the study results. Only with consent, unidentified quotes obtained during the interview may be used in the dissemination of research findings. Assigned codes will be used to replace all participants' names and the names of any places or events. Only representatives of The University of Western Ontario Non-Medical Research Ethics Board may require access to the study-related records to monitor the conduct of the research. Researchers in this study have obligations to report some information to outside agencies (e.g., information about abuse of minors to CAS, or other such information) that may arise in this study. Other people/groups/organizations outside the study team will not have access to information collected. Any personal information about you in a form of a hard copy will be kept for 7 years in a locked cabinet at the researcher's locked office. A list linking your assigned code for the research study with your name will be encrypted and kept in a password-protected file, separate from all other files, in the hard-drive of the researcher's laptop, which is encrypted and has personalized lock system. Only ZHAO Fengchenzi (the researcher) and Dr. Marianne Larsen (the Principal Investigator) have access to this laptop. All the data will be securely destroyed using industry-standard shredders and data-deletion software after the retention period of 7 years.

If you have any questions about the rights of the participants or the conduct of this study, you may contact The Office of Human Research Ethics at (519) 661-3036; 1(844)720- 9816 or at [ethics@uwo.ca](mailto:ethics@uwo.ca).

Fengchenzi Zhao

## Appendix C: Consent Form

**Principal Investigator:** Dr. Marianne Larsen, Full Professor, Faculty of Education,  
Western University, [REDACTED] [REDACTED]

**Additional Researcher:** Fengchenzi Zhao, MA candidate, Faculty of Education,  
Western University, [REDACTED] [REDACTED]

I have read the Letter of Information, have had the nature of the study explained to me  
and all questions have been answered to my satisfaction.

I want to participate in the study ☐ YES ☐ NO

I consent to the use of unidentified quotes obtained during the study in the  
dissemination of research findings. ☐ YES ☐ NO

Print Name \_\_\_\_\_

Signature \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

My signature means that I have explained the study to the participant named above. I  
have answered all questions.

Name of Person Obtaining Consent FENGCHENZI ZHAO

Signature of Person Obtaining Consent \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

## **Appendix D: Interview Protocol**

### **Part 1 BACKGROUND QUESTIONS:**

Tell me a little bit about yourself

- 1) Where did you complete your PhD? Which faculty?
- 2) How long have you lived in a Western country such as [Canada] for your university education? When did you complete your PhD?
- 3) What is your area of study? (field of study, discipline, etc.)

### **Part 2 APPLYING FOR ACADEMIC POSITIONS IN CHINA**

Let's talk about your experiences being interviewed for academic positions in Chinese universities.

- 1) What are the reasons that you wanted an academic position after completing your PhD?
- 2) What are the reasons that you wanted an academic position in China?
- 3) Can you tell me how many academic jobs have you applied for? When did you start to apply?
- 4) Of those applications, how many interviews have you had?

### **Part 3 BEING INTERVIEWED FOR ACADEMIC POSITIONS IN CHINA**

Please choose one of those interviews you've had (and perhaps consider talking about an interview where you feel gender played a role) and let's call this your interview with University X.

- 1) What were the qualifications/criteria for this academic position? Did you have all of the qualifications required for the job?
- 2) Could you please describe the process of applying for this job? What were you required to submit (e.g. covering letter, CV, reference letters)? Were you required to indicate your gender/age on the application materials for this position?
- 3) How long was it between applying for the position and hearing back from the university that you were chosen to be interviewed?

Now, I am going to ask some general questions about the interview and after I'm going to ask you about any experiences you may have had with gender discrimination during the interview. Can you tell me what that experience was like? What happened? How did you

act? How did you feel? **Think of it as a story that you are telling me, the story of being interviewed for an academic position.**

- 1) Can you describe for me the steps in the interview process (e.g. was there a phone/virtual interview before a face-to-face interview? Did you have to do a research presentation before your interview?)
- 2) When were you interviewed for this position? How long was the interview more or less?
- 3) How did you prepare your interview? (e.g. did you do any research about the department/faculty; did you research/find out about different individuals working in the faculty and/or administration – e.g. the department chair, Dean)
- 4) Can you describe the physical space that the interview took place in? (eg. how were the table and chairs arranged; where people were sitting)
- 5) Who interviewed you (e.g. a committee of people/appointments team; the Dean). Of those who interviewed you, which individuals were male and which were female?
- 6) Please describe for me what it was like for you during the interview.
- 7) What kinds of questions were you asked? How did you feel during the interview?
- 8) At the end of the interview, what were you told about their decision-making process?
- 9) Were you offered any of the positions you've just talked to me about? If not, do you think gender may have played a role in the decision-making process?

NOW, ASK THE participant if they have been interviewed for any other academic positions in China and ask them the same questions above with respect to that experience. (Note: will not ask the same questions for more than 3 interviews).

We are now going to talk about gender challenges that you feel you faced during the interviews.

#### **Part 4 REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS ABOUT GENDER AND THE INTERVIEW PROCESS**

Some people argue that women are disadvantaged when trying to find academic positions. I would like to ask you a few questions about gender and your experiences trying to find an academic job in China.

- 1) Do you think it is more difficult for women to obtain an academic job in China compared with men? If so, why?
- 2) In sharing with me your experiences with being interviewed for an academic position in China, do you feel that gender played a role in shaping that experience? If so, how?

Please be specific with any examples that you would like to share with me. (Prompts: For example, were you asked questions such as ‘are you married’, ‘do you plan to have a family’, ‘do you plan to have a baby soon?’ etc. Were you asked to have a pregnancy check at any point of the interview? Did anyone comment on your appearance (e.g. how you were dressed) etc.

- 3) Do you think your gender has given you more advantages or disadvantages in the academic job market in China? If you didn’t get any of the jobs you applied for, do you think gender may have played a role in the decision-making process?
- 4) You talked above about how you felt gender has played a role in your search for an academic position in China. How have you navigated or dealt with these challenges? In other words, is there anything you have done to help you overcome the disadvantages you felt you faced as a woman applying for an academic job in China?

### **Part 5 EXPECTATIONS VS REALITY OF THE JOB APPLICATION PROCESS**

- 1) While you were in the process of applying for jobs, what were your expectations with trying to find an academic job in China and the interview process for finding a job in China to be like?
- 2) How, if at all, were your expectations different from your actual experiences in trying to find a job in China? If they were different, why was that so?
- 3) Do you think that being educated abroad in a Western country such as [Canada] for your PhD has made you more aware about issues of gender and gender discrimination in society in general? Has your education abroad helped you to understand your own experiences of gender discrimination? If so, how?
- 4) If something could be changed to improve the experience of the job application and interview process, what will that be?

## Appendix E: Ethics Board Approval Letter



**Date:** 31 July 2019

**To:** Dr. Marianne Larsen

**Project ID:** 114177

**Study Title:** How gender shapes the experiences of Chinese females educated abroad in finding academic positions in China: A feminist standpoint theory case study

**Short Title:** HOW GENDER SHAPES THE EXPERIENCES OF CHINESE FEMALES EDUCATED ABROAD IN FINDING ACADEMIC POSITIONS IN CHINA A FEMINIST STANDPOINT THEORY CASE STUDY

**Application Type:** NMREB Initial Application

**Review Type:** Delegated

**Full Board Reporting Date:** September 6 2019

**Date Approval Issued:** 31/Jul/2019

**REB Approval Expiry Date:** 31/Jul/2020

Dear Dr. Marianne Larsen

The Western University Non-Medical Research Ethics Board (NMREB) has reviewed and approved the WREM application form for the above mentioned study, as of the date noted above. NMREB approval for this study remains valid until the expiry date noted above, conditional to timely submission and acceptance of NMREB Continuing Ethics Review.

This research study is to be conducted by the investigator noted above. All other required institutional approvals must also be obtained prior to the conduct of the study.

### Documents Approved:

Document Name	Document Type	Document Date	Document Version
email script rev per REB recommendations	Recruitment Materials	24/Jul/2019	clean
interview questions revised	Interview Guide	13/Jun/2019	1
LOI and Consent- Chinese females edu abroad academic position	Written Consent/Assent	24/Jul/2019	clean
LOI and Verbal Consent- Chinese females edu abroad academic positions	Verbal Consent/Assent	24/Jul/2019	clean

No deviations from, or changes to the protocol should be initiated without prior written approval from the NMREB, except when necessary to eliminate immediate hazard(s) to study participants or when the change(s) involves only administrative or logistical aspects of the trial.

The Western University NMREB operates in compliance with the Tri-Council Policy Statement Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS2), the Ontario Personal Health Information Protection Act (PHIPA, 2004), and the applicable laws and regulations of Ontario. Members of the NMREB who are named as Investigators in research studies do not participate in discussions related to, nor vote on such studies when they are presented to the REB. The NMREB is registered with the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services under the IRB registration number IRB 00000941.

Please do not hesitate to contact us if you have any questions.

Sincerely,

Kelly Patterson, Research Ethics Officer on behalf of Dr. Randal Graham, NMREB Chair

*Note: This correspondence includes an electronic signature (validation and approval via an online system that is compliant with all regulations).*

## Curriculum Vitae

<b>Name:</b>	Fengchenzi Zhao
<b>Post-secondary Education and Degrees:</b>	<p>The University of Western Ontario London, Ontario, Canada 2018-2020 M.A.</p> <p>Beijing Language and Culture University Beijing, China 2008-2012 B.A.</p>
<b>Honours and Awards:</b>	<p>National Merit Scholarship (First class) 2010-2011</p> <p>Excellent Graduation Thesis 07/2012</p>
<b>Related Work Experience:</b>	<p>Research Assistant The University of Western Ontario 2018-2020</p> <p>Sales Coordinator, Business Administrator, Translator China Transport Infocom Technologies Co. 2012-2017</p>